

## **Multigenerational Family Life in the Longevity Revolution**

**Dennis R. Myers, Ph.D, The Dorothy Barfield Kronzer Professor in Family Studies**

### **Kronzer Presentation and Lecture**

**September 24, 2010**

#### **Luncheon Presentation**

My Family, First Lady Starr, Kim Kronzer O'Brien and family; Wally Kronzer and family; Board of Advocates, Provost Davis, Faculty Senate Chair Ray Cannon, Dean Garland, members of the School of Social Work; faculty colleagues, students, friends, I deeply appreciate the honor I have to be the inaugural professor for the Dorothy Barfield Kronzer Professorship in Family Studies. I am particularly grateful for the confidence that Dean Diana Garland and my colleagues placed in me. I want to say thank you to Lois, my wife for her constant support, for the inspiration of her scholarship and to my mother, Margie Myers, for the untold ways you and Dad sacrificially made it possible for me to pursue educational preparation for a day like today. To Lori, my daughter and to David, my son – I love you and bless you, and I am thankful for the gift of Anna and Clive, my daughter- and son-in-love. This endowed professorship generously provides a unique and vital opportunity for those who occupy it to the Baylor School of Social Work to strengthen the well-being of families in congregations and communities for ages to come.

My sense of alignment with the intention of this endowment is so compelling that I was willing to leave meaningful position as Associate Dean for the MSW program to pursue the worthy purposes of this professorship.

For the lecture I will do this afternoon, I selected the topic on Multigenerational Family Life in the Longevity Revolution. My conversations with Dorothy Kronzer's family and friends lead me to the observation that she devoted her life to loving and caring for the generations. Her gift of this Drawing Room is an act of honoring of her parents. Because of this gift, students and faculty of all ages celebrate graduations, academic achievement, special lectures, and even dances?

Dorothy provided leadership for the Cradle Roll at her church, formally enrolling infants into the life of the fellowship. She volunteered to rock babies so that parents could worship. She served as a Camp Fire leader, beginning when Kim was in second grade and continued until Kim graduated from high school. On the other end of the generational spectrum, she faithfully provided a hair care ministry for women who lived at Buckner Baptist Haven. She understood the generational significance of the Good old Baylor Line. She knew it was formed by successive cohorts of graduates. She poured her love of the generations into the Baylor Alumni Association, becoming in 1976 the first female President of the Association. She believed that her service to Alumni would yield a stronger Baylor for the generations who would "light the ways of time." She started the Baylor Fling to celebrate friendships across time. I knew Mrs. Kronzer in her role as co-founder and leader of the Herbert H. Reynolds Summer School for Retired Persons. She was able to convince members of South Main Baptist Church and others to come to Baylor for five days and take on the role of a much younger college student, attending classes and staying in the dorms, no small feat. Kim reflects that her mother was a genuine person, who was clear where she stood. Her natural inclination was to believe the best about everyone—she lived out her Christian profession, which included a love for family and a willingness to touch lives across generational borders.

I am inspired by these examples, as well as those done quietly without acknowledgement, of her love for Baylor and for the generations that inhabit the blessing of this place. I am deeply honored by this once in a lifetime opportunity.

## **Kronzer Lecture**

### *Introduction*

Dorothy Barfield Kronzer invested her life in care for families and for the generations. It just seemed entirely fitting to me that this presentation today should be about the generations. I want to focus on multigenerational families and the ways in the longevity epoch is reshaping it. I will pay a lot of attention to the relationship of parents and adult children.

### *Presentation*

Dramatic increases in life expectancy have radically increased the relational life of families. James Lubben, Director of the Institute on Aging at Boston College, equates the force of this longevity epoch to the transformative impact of the Industrial Revolution.

The average years lived by a person increased from forty-seven in 1900 to seventy-seven in 2000, and the proportion of persons surviving from birth to old age (sixty-five) increased from 39 percent to 86 percent during the twentieth century. Current life expectancy in the US is 78, ranked 49<sup>th</sup> among the nations of the world-the highest ranked country is Macau (84.36 years) and the shortest life expectancy is Angola at 38 years. Persons who live to be 65 have life expectancies that reach into the mid-80s.

These revolutionary improvements in mortality greatly increase relationship across core expressions of familial life--marriage, grandparenthood, sibling relations, and parent-adult child relations. For example, the likelihood of a marriage surviving 60 years are at the highest levels ever-yet the increasing divorce rate has offset the actual numbers of couples who benefit from this demographic possibility. If the human lifespan is 120-130 years, marital careers have the theoretical possibility of lasting for 100 years. For those who are affected by the loss of a spouse through death or divorce, dating and long-term companionate relationships are a growing feature of relationships in this longevity epoch.

Four and five generational families are a growing trend, with the family structure being characterized as a bean pole-tall and yet slender because of the trend toward declining fertility. More than ever before, adults have living grandparents. The likelihood of a thirty year old having a living grandparent increased from about 20 percent in 1900 to 75 percent in 2000. It is increasing common for grandparents to report the number of great grandchildren they have. Sibling relations are the longest lasting human relationship and the likelihood of being in this relationship for seventy or more years has sharply increased.

The longevity epoch is reshaping the nature of family relationships at a pace that outruns the capacity of the academy and human service institutions to respond. The essential questions about this reality are complex and contradictory: What does it mean to be in a society increasingly populated by relatively healthy, active, and engaged 60, 70, 80, 90 or even 100 year old persons who are seeking new definitions for what it means to be in a marriage or significant relationship, to be a grandparent, a sibling, a parent or adult child or to be without a family? Conversely, how

can a family and a society respond to the inevitable family care demands of a very old population as fertility and economic resources decline? What are the implications of these generational realities for a university and for a School of Social Work?

How fortunate we all are that the Kronzer family established this professorship to speak into these large and important questions.

One place to begin the creation of reasoned responses to these questions is to address what I believe to be the most significant result of mortality changes for the family – the increased probability that parents and adult children will be in relationship for 50-60 years. The parent-child bond is the strongest there is. In 1900 only about 8 percent of 60 year olds had a parent still alive, compared to 44 percent of 60 year olds in 2000. This demographic fact means that parents have two to three times more years available with their children as adults than as non-adults. Also, demographic studies reveal that adults today have more living parents than they have living children. Advances in biology and technology are shifting the conversation about the length of the parent-child bond from mere life extension to life expansion. Even when a parent or adult child is at a distance or passes away, they remain an ever-present and powerful psychological presence. Internal influence and dialogues continue as illustrated by this film clip.

A relationship that spans mortality certainly deserves our full attention. In our time together, I want highlight the contours and nature of this everyday and often overlooked relationship and illustrate the rich implications for research, curriculum, and social work practice.

Authors of novels, fairy tales, spiritual lessons, and scholarly works do not have to define for readers what they mean when they use terms like *childhood* and *parenthood*. The landscape and boundaries are understood and extensively mapped. Add the term *adulthood* to the mix, however, and we have fewer points of reference.

Most adult children and parents of adult children whom I've asked tell me that they devote at least some energy daily to thinking about the other. Even after our parent or adult child dies, we may often revisit memories of them and frequently try to guess how they would react to some current circumstance. Thinking about our children or parents occurs so naturally that we are often unaware we are doing so. Nevertheless, our thoughts may have become so routine that we do not act upon them. Selective inattention between parents and adult children has some survival value, but it is counterproductive if it causes us to dismiss subtle requests for our presence, to fail to seek forgiveness for those times when we are the cause of pain to our loved ones, or to deny the effects of challenges that emerge, sometimes of our own making, sometimes beyond our control.

It is difficult to engage an experience if we have no name for it. We who speak English do not have language to help us talk about adult-child relationships. The use of *adult* and *child* together to form a one-word adjective may even seem oxymoronic, even humorous. Attempts to insert other English-language qualifiers, e.g., grown child, adult offspring, midlife children, likewise fail to remedy the confusion. This syntactical awkwardness mirrors the uncertainty of beliefs, norms, and practices surrounding the relationship.

We need new words in English to capture the idea that the relationship between people and their parents outlives childhood. Other languages have words to avoid the confusion we encounter. For example, some languages, such as Japanese, distinguish adult sons and daughters from their non-adult counterparts. While we who speak English await a new word, the term *adult child* will have to suffice.

Whatever language is adopted, conversation related to the parent-child-adult triangle inevitably evokes diverse responses. Many people can honestly acknowledge both joyful and painful aspects of the relationship. *Perfect* is a word we associate with neither *parent* nor *child*. Gloria Gaither said it well from the perspective of the parent: “Now that we have been parents for twenty-seven years, we know that parenting never stops. . . . Parenting has been and still is the most glorious and most painful, most joyful and most troubling, most demanding and most rewarding of all life’s commitments.” Adult children likewise characterize their experience as

The relationship is like an interrobang, a computer punctuation mark developed by the Rand Corporation for situations that require both an exclamation point and a question mark. The relationship is both! and? as parents and adult children live at the convergence of affirmation and suspicion, faith and unbelief, adventure and tedium, advance and retreat, hope and despair.

The complexity of conversations around this relationship was powerfully delivered to me in the form of a letter from one of my students. In our curriculum in the School of Social Work, we encourage students to examine their own family relationships as a path to becoming competent in

assessing and working in families. For most students, this is a rewarding and enlightening experience, for others, the effect is devastating.

She writes:

*I haven't spoken to my parents in more than four years, and I haven't seen either of them in more than five years. My mother lives less than two hours away from where I now live. I believe that if you were to ask her, she would tell you that she loves me dearly and that she misses me terribly. Perhaps she does. But I cannot allow her into my life again, no matter what she says. This is the hard, excruciatingly lonely reality of my life. I grew up in an incredibly dysfunctional, abusive, and often violent home. As a student working towards my undergraduate degree in social work, I am frequently challenged with class projects, assignments, and discussions about families. Most of my classmates share openly and freely about their experiences with their parents and families. I do not. When these discussions begin, the pain and anxiety I experience are overwhelming. I am often flooded with painful memories, flashbacks, even, of the horror of my childhood. I feel the grief and loss of knowing I do not have the kind of family my friends are describing. And I feel shame. Overwhelming, paralyzing shame. I sit in silence, hoping and praying that my professor won't call on me to share about my own family, desperate to protect the secrets I have kept hidden my entire life. I worry that my friends will be horrified and shocked if I speak the truth about my family. I worry that my professors will see so much dysfunction and damage from my "baggage" that they will discourage or move to prevent me from becoming a social worker.*

*Without knowing me, it may be difficult for you to comprehend how something as simple as a discussion about families could possibly be so difficult for me. That's okay. Just*



*know that what I experience during these discussions is real, it is powerful, and it affects me. I am learning to adjust and cope with this difficult part of my education, and I believe there are positive lessons and opportunities for growth that come out of this experience. But it is a slow, arduous road I'm traveling, and I'm not finished yet. So please be patient with me, and with those like me, who find themselves in your classrooms, your lectures, your discussion groups. Everyone has a story, but they don't always look like everyone else's story, and everyone isn't always ready to tell their story. Allow them to get to that place in their own time, in their own way. Honor what they are able to share with you, and respect what they don't. For some of us, we're only beginning to find our voices.*

I am grateful for this student who had the courage to speak about her experience. Her words certify what we all know – here is a relationship of deep complexity and emotional presence. We are growing in our understanding of the relationship. In research surveys, adults reported continued strong feelings of attachment and connection with parents or children as well as high levels of frequent contact. Ironically, having more time to be present together may dull our vision concerning what is possible in the relationship. Familiarity may not always breed contempt, but it certainly can and does create relational ruts and inattention. When asked if the life they are living with an adult child or with their parent is satisfying, most respondents state that they long for more time, for second chances, and for both affirmation and release. The gap between what we want and what we have raises vital questions that call for answers that can meaningfully inform both the relationship and the practice of social work.

Here are some of the questions that motivate my interest:

- How does the relationship move, over time, from a relationship based upon dependency and parental authority to one based on interdependence and egalitarian norms?
- How does the shared narrative transform both of them developmentally?
- What does faith have to do with this mutual transformation and with the caregiving that both do?
- What are the impacts of poverty and ethnicity on the nature and quality of the relationship?
- How can social workers empower parents and adult children to embrace, redeem, or release their relationship?

As the person honored to occupy the Dorothy Kronzer Professorship in Family Studies, I have an unusual opportunity to join with colleagues in responding to these questions.

#### What we know

The cultural landscape contains many signs that the adult filial relationship attracts much interest. Generally, we want to be together. Parents and adult children frequently call or visit one another and tend to live in close proximity. Increased longevity offers us more years to be together, but even so, Jane Adams reminds us, there is a limit to the number of *great* years we have together. The constant fact of aging creates a sense of urgency for those who want to focus on their parent and adult child relationships.

Recent years have produced an avalanche of guides and academic research aimed at improving the filial relationship in some way and at increasing understanding of its psychological and sociological features. Most of the prescriptive work focuses on strengthening the ability of

parents to relate productively with their grown children. Mother-daughter relations receive more attention than the father-son relationship. All of these recent studies debunk the myth of post parentalism, and most assume that the relationship is problematic, particularly during critical transitional periods, such as the empty nest and health crises requiring caregiving. Guidelines with intentional focus on the filial relationship per se are rare.

Vivian Greenberg's contribution, *Children of a Certain Age*, is one that provides useful insights into the ways parents and adult children can form promising relationships. In addition to print resources, electronic and broadcast media stimulate interest in the filial relationship among adults. Numerous Web sites provide resources for adult children who care for their parents, and newsletters such as *Answers* update and encourage parents in relating to adult children. Some works acknowledge the spiritual and religious aspects of the relationship, but some of them cite sacred matters as contributors to dissonance in the relationship. Over the last ten to fifteen years, numerous motion pictures and television comedies have dealt with the complexities of the relationship. Some are particularly powerful at communicating the impact of cultural shifts and unfulfilled expectations on the relationship.

These changes can create considerable dissonance in the relationship as illustrated by this film clip (My Big, Fat Greek Wedding)

### **What we know**

Traditional ideas of what a family looks like have been considerably revised in the last several decades. Single parent and step-families now predominate, creating competitive demands on the

time and energy available for sustaining filial relations. Marriage with one person for a lifetime is no longer the societal norm. Mobility and geographic distance may negatively impact supportive relationships by restraining access and physical presence. Under these conditions, maintaining care and connection with one another has become a more voluntary than obligatory act.

Technology supports our choice to relate by providing constant and accessible venues for both visual and voice communication. On the other hand, the incredible rate of technological change and the extent to which parents and adult children differ in their use of technology may actually increase emotional and generational distance. In our digitized lives, our multitasking may actually sidetrack our intentions to contact one another or may interrupt the quality of our presence with one another. Edwin Klingelhofer laments the emergence of technologically driven youth culture that produces a “walling off of young people from adults, creating a sort of intrafamily ghetto of the young.” Likewise, the same advances in medical technology that have extended our potential life span also have provided unparalleled control over human reproduction. As a result, tolerance for what is acceptable sexual practice is often broader for the younger generation than the older one, proving yet another reason for parents and adult children to misunderstand one another.

Individual religious faith and practice, or the lack thereof, also affects the balance of filial relationships. Some people find the answer to overcoming the generational ghettoization suggested by Klingelhofer by living into a shared faith.

More often than not, however, differences in religious beliefs and values threaten filial relationships. Adult child and parents may reject the religious practices and beliefs of the other. The problem is not always that the older generation is more traditional than the younger. I recall the lament of a devout Jewish mother over the adoption of religious practices by her adult children that prevented them from partaking of meals in her home because they kept a more conservative kosher regimen than she.

Geographic mobility and economic conditions are additional factors that affect the filial bond. Like the forces of technology and values, the ability to relocate and to acquire resources may either infuse or drain relational energy. Parents and adult children may choose to relocate nearer to one another but they may also move farther away. Economic abundance may facilitate possibilities for relationship while economic scarcity either drives parents and adult children together or imposes barriers between them. When one's full attention is required to secure basic human needs for nutrition and shelter, little energy is left to attend to the spiritual and emotional aspects of filial relationships.

In usually imperceptible ways, influences such as these work toward the construction or destruction of filial relations. Creating a bond in the post-modern age that is resilient in the face of constant change requires parents and adult children to awake to the possibility in the everyday and to remain alert for ways to create and sustain the bond. Greenberg concludes that "the fact that the parent-child bond has endured throughout this modern chaos testifies to the strength of the ties that bind the generations together. It also demands that we do all we possibly can to keep

those ties viable. Although it is hard to describe the nature of the bond, we can say that it is powerful, precious, and complex.”

### Big and Helpful Ideas

Strengthening the bonds between parents and adult children depends on big and heuristic ideas that can help us understand the bond and the connections and transactions that transform and diminish the relationship. One of these ideas is Life Course Parenthood

#### Life course parenthood

Blind acceptance of post-parentalism, the belief that adult offspring pass beyond the need for parenting, and the role of parents in their lives, clouds our thinking about family relationships.

In contrast to post parentalism, recent theological and social science studies focusing on contemporary family life recognize that parent and child relationships continue to be very important and formative for most adults. Eleanor Farjeon, for example, refutes the corollary of post parentalism and post childhoodism when she observes that “the events of childhood do not pass, but repeat themselves like the seasons of the year.”

This conceptual image opens up new possibilities for understanding the nature of parenthood in a longevity context. Inherent in mutuality is an openness to live into new roles that reflect the varying seasons of our shared life. Over time, as co-authors of one narrative, we may serve alternately as protector, adversary, teacher, student, mentor, anchor or guide. In adulthood, these roles tend to lose their generational assignments, and both the younger and the older partners in the covenant enact them as appropriate. While the image forms an ideal type, it does offer a new

way of thinking about what transpires between parents and children as they move through the seasons of their relational life.

Taken together, Obligation, Reciprocity, and Ambivalence are three ideas helpful in understanding the architecture and interplay that mark this relationship.

### Obligation

Obligation refers to cultural and moral norms that call for a course of action imposed by society, law, or conscience by which one is bound or restricted. It is a state, fact, or feeling of being indebted to another for a special service or favor received. One explanation for the nature of relational life is a sense of duty to another, usually grounded in a moral teaching or belief. If this tie is validated by both parties, the relationship has an authentic basis for life together. At times changes in the relationship related to life transitions or health may severely test the bond created by an authentic sense of obligation. (Forget Paris movie clip)

In our society, the fifth commandment has significantly infused the sense of obligation with moral and cultural salience. The parent-adult child relationship is so important to God that the Eternal Parent included a prescription for it among the Ten Commandments. We are instructed to place honor at the heart of our bond, and children are promised longevity if they pay attention to honoring their parents. The fifth commandment is the first one of the ten that recognizes persons as relational creations. The commandment tells us, “Honor your father and thy mother so that you’ll live a long time in the land that GOD, your God, is giving you.” (Exodus 20, *The Message*, 138). The prescription to honor mother and father is directed to adult children.

Honor, meaning to give weight to or acknowledge the worth of, is an essential virtue to be woven into the fabric of the parent-child narrative.

Honoring, like loving and trusting, is relational energy generated by honesty and kindness. The result of honoring is that we offer the other the very affirmation that we desire from them. Just as adult children honor and dishonor parents, parents honor and dishonor their adult children. Adult children honor parents by listening and parents honor their adult offspring through blessing. Parents dishonor their children when they dishonor the child's adulthood. As time passes, early patterns of parental authority and conversation evolve into more collegial exchanges. Sometimes the transition is nuanced and gradual, at other times, sharp and sudden. How we honor one another has everything to do with the role of authority and control in the relationship. For both parents and adult children, knowing when to speak up and when to be silent is a constant dynamic we cannot ignore. The authority theme is constantly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the life of the bond.

Releasing adult children is the most difficult honoring job that parents do. The hands that hold and protect also have the power to liberate the adult child into the uncertainties of everyday life, the possibility of their demise, and the larger narrative of God. This releasing theme is evident in the responses of parents to the decisions of adult sons and daughters deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Here is an excerpt from interviews we are conducting related to our Military Families research project lead by Dr. Jim Ellor.



### Military Parent Quote:

Letting go feels like placing an adult child on an altar of great vulnerability. It challenges the illusion that the hands of a parent are able to hold on tightly enough to prevent the child's being snatched away by death. Ask most parents and they may share the secret they carry somewhere deep inside: a fear related to the possible untimely death of their adult child. The truth is that the unyielding grasp of fearful parents or fearful adult children actually contains emotional and spiritual dishonor. The challenge we face is to listen to the Spirit of God, honor our parent or adult child, and trust the power of the Eternal Parent to hold on to the lives of our sons and daughters as well as mothers and fathers.

How can parents and adult children engage the power of honoring when the gift is not reciprocated or when it seems like there is nothing to honor? Parents and adult children often disagree, disappoint, or destroy. Honoring ebbs and flows. Honor given may not be received and may even be impossible to give. Adult children care for older parents who abused them and parents care for abusive adult children. Sometimes adversity is a pathway to reconciliation and honor, but most of the time the offer is not reciprocated. It can be enacted out of obligation. Even when honoring is robbed of its power to bless the bond, it can still be transacted to honor God and self.

### Reciprocity-Exchanges

In addition to obligation, reciprocity contributes important understanding to this relationship. We can think about reciprocity in this relationship in two very different ways. One way is the solidarity that parents and children experience when they exchange affection, communication,

and services that occur in the relationship and the other involves the ways that reciprocity between them influences the life course development of both parents and adult child.

Research also supports the fact that adult child-parent solidarity undergoes repeated change in sync with the constant flux of larger social, economic, and cultural factors.

Adult sons and daughters and their parents potentially share a variety of tangible and relational exchanges in sustaining solidarity in relationship. For example, they help one another out in daily acts of helping, one mows the yard for one will the other provides a meal. Communications via phone, texting, letters, and e-mail help to solidify the intergenerational bond as do expressions of shared beliefs and affection. According to social exchange and equity theory, the perceived equality of these transactions predict the quality of the relationship. For example,

- Unmarried women get more help from parents, while divorced children have weaker ties with parents.
- The bond parents feel for their children is greater than the bond children feel toward their parents, a fact so well accepted that it has been labeled the developmental stake.
- African-American and Hispanic adult children have emotionally closer relationship with their parents than their Anglo counterparts.
- Mothers and daughters have the greatest emotional closeness whereas sons and fathers are more emotionally conflicted and distant.
- Emotional help is the most common kind of support, rather than routine exchanges of practical or financial assistance.
- Reciprocity (sense of equality in the exchange of help) is an important factor in parental well-being.

## Life Course Development

Reciprocity is also an important dynamic in the adult development of both filial partners. A bond filled with thousands of shared experiences, memories, thoughts, and feelings. Hudson posits that human development is a cyclic and emerging process. He suggests that core development themes such as identity, intimacy, and meaning are negotiated in repeated cycles throughout the life course.

As parents and adult child travel these development trajectories, they are reciprocally influenced by the adaptations of their parent or adult child – a process called developmental Cogwheeling.

## Ambivalence

Pillemer and Lucher (2004) argue that obligation and reciprocity are not sufficient bases for understanding this relationship. They proposed that the relationship between parents and adult children is essentially ambivalent. The main dynamic in parent and adult child relations is psychological and sociological contradictions or dilemmas. You cannot understand this relationship if you do not account for simultaneous existence of encouraging and discouraging sentiments. Also, use a within the family rather than between family design to explore intrafamily variations in ambivalence. Not all parental-adult offspring experience ambivalence- but there is strong support for the idea that this is an important explainer or variation. Here are examples of the kinds of conflicting normative structures that adult child and parents attempt to express at the same time-a truly impossible expectation.

Enriching the bond between Parent & Adult Child:

Implications for SW Practice & Policy – What do we need?

These Big ideas suggest that obligation, honoring, reciprocity, and ambivalence in everyday parent and adult child relationships explain why these relationships thrive and decline. The good news is that the bond is still relatively strong. We are also experiencing difficult challenges to the viability of the parent and adult child relationship. Increasing divorce rates, fertility declines, and diminished sense of obligation are particularly threatening to the sense of filial responsibility to one another. Increases in inheritance contracting—an arrangement wherein adult child agree to care for their parents in return of the inheritance from the parents mark this change.

As this chart illustrates, thirty-six percent of our country's resources for payment of long-term care depend on donated services that are motivated in large part, by the parent-child bond. Our economic future depends upon the viability of this bond. We need social workers who are prepared to sustain it.

Reconciliation

We also need social workers who are prepared to engage filial relationships in need of reconciliation. (Joy Luck Club film clip)

Sometimes the work will involve coming along side a parent who has the power of a blessing and sometimes it is coming along side an adult child who has the power of forgiveness.

Sometimes it is doing the work of release when reconciliation and forgiveness are impossible.

## Reunion

We need social workers who can respond to the new themes and reunions in the relationship. For example, to help negotiate multilayered relationships when fathers, mothers, birth mothers, and daughters are reunited.

## Convoys of Care

We need social workers who can enter the crucible of caregiving, providing support for vulnerable caregivers and capable of creating “convoys of care” that recognize the salience of aunts and uncles, other family and friends in filial relationships.

## Enriching the bond between Parent & Adult Child: Implications for SW

We need social workers who can deliver the kinds of counseling and parenting information needed to support grandparents who find themselves as parents. We need social workers who can lead in the development of public policies that recognize the utility of the parent and child bonds for social and economic justice.

## A Call to Covenant Relationship

Our shared lives rely on the promises we make and keep. You recall the Biblical story of Ruth and her promise to Naomi sealed a covenant relationship between them. Her love for Naomi and her newfound love of God had awakened an irresistible impulse to commit to a life-long agreement of oneness in heart and spirit. There were no written contract, no material provision, and no signatures. Spiritual and emotional covenants are like that. They will not be restrained by self-protective limitations or by contingency clauses. The promises have to do with eternal

habits, commitments to be present with each other, to see the other as friend, to embrace the parent and child within each other, to claim the promises of God, and to allow the Word to light the shared path. Covenant life between parent, adult child, and God reflects the warm intimacy that exists between the eternal Son and Parent. Madeleine L'Engle illustrates the kind of enlightened knowing within a parent-adult child covenant:

[Here is] a story of a Hasidic rabbi, renowned for his piety. He was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of feeling, the young disciple exclaimed, "My master, I love you!" The ancient teacher looked up from his books and asked his fervent disciple, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?"

The young man was puzzled. Composing himself, he stuttered, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions."

"My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant," rejoined the rabbi, "For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"

### Three Circles

Covenant means applying our hearts and minds to listen to and accept each other's vulnerabilities. As we offer what we fear as well as what we celebrate, our mutual strangeness gives way to deeper authenticity. A shared life that risks honest revelations of our hearts and spirits meets the requirements of adulthood better than the outmoded models upon which we based our earlier lives together. We move away from well-intended deceptions that we think protect or reassure ourselves and the other. We leave behind the pretense that marked Jacob in his relationship with his father, Isaac (Genesis 27); appearing to be someone we are not in an

effort to receive what we think we need from our mother or father, son or daughter. The honest presentation of who we are—both the light and the dark within us—lays the foundation for the kind of filial covenant that God builds.

## Generational Slide

### Conclusion

Dorothy Barfield Kronzer had a bracelet made and on it she placed the pictures of her children. She wore this bracelet almost daily. She had a lot of choices of what she could have placed on the bracelet. She chose the pictures of her children. For her, a son and a daughter were relationships you keep with you every day and for a lifetime. I find in her practice both personal and professional instruction. I have a personal desire and some sense of urgency to pay attention to and create covenant within my own filial relationships. I am dissatisfied with passing by on the margins of the lives of my adult daughter and son as well as my mother. I am blessed to be associated with the Kronzer family and with colleagues that want to keep families close and at the heart of our shared academic and professional life. A community of learning and research that comprehends the possibilities of the longevity epoch, builds upon and creates big ideas, and prepares social workers as agents of generational healing and vitality. One that embraces the opportunities and challenges of the ever-changing multigenerational family.