

THE SANDWICH GENERATION

By Chaplain Paul L. Slater

Introduction: "What's cooking?"

My generation, the baby boomers, is also described using a food analogy—the “sandwich generation”. How fitting, especially when you think of middle age spread! Berger states, “The term sandwich generation evokes images of two slices of bread with a substantial filling—meat, jam, peanut butter cheese—in the middle” (Berger, 2001, p. 593). Usually there are images of people overstressed, burned out, feeling “put upon” when the sandwich generation is the topic of discussion. This image is refuted by the most recent studies, as this paper will reveal.

Since the analogy to food is already in place by the reference to sandwich, I will continue to use that analogy throughout this paper for easier readability. My age at 58 makes me a bona fide baby boomer! Born in 1946 just after World War II is all that is required for me to fit this definition. As to being in the sandwich generation, my wife and I are well on our way to being in that select group as well. We have an adult son, 32 years old, who lives in our home. And while my wife’s parents do not live with us, we are presently in the process of getting them to move closer to one of their children. Just this week they admitted that they have been fixing up their house just in case they should decide to sell. They have also had a realtor friend do a price analysis, just out of curiosity, *should* they decide to sell *sometime* in the future.

Want me to make you a sandwich? Origin of the term "Sandwich Generation"

It’s interesting how a reference to my generation being “sandwiched” has taken on a life of its own. Such is the case of "Sandwich Generation", defined on "The Word Spy" website as "people who must care for both their children and their parents; people who have finished raising

their children and now must take care of their aging parents" (McFedries, 2004, section on Sandwich Generation)

One individual who has become one of the foremost authorities on the subject is Carol Abaya. A journalist by trade, her own experience became the basis of research, articles, and broadcasts through which she shared information and insights with others. She says:

I became involved -- very suddenly -- in my parents daily care and life more than 10 years ago. My mother was 85 at the time and my father 90. The family was completely unprepared to deal with the legal, financial and emotional issues. There was little information to guide me. Little to help me deal with my roller coaster emotions. Little to help me deal with sandwich generation role reversal scenarios. Or having to make decisions for my very independent parents. (Abaya, 2004, section entitled "Welcome to this Special Site")

She even trademarked the term "The Sandwich Generation", publishing a magazine by the same name for 6 years and now writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column, *The Sandwich Generation* (c) (TM) and a unique radio series called *Conversations With Carol*. (Et al Abaya) *Where shall we eat? Locations of the care*

Since the food theme has been established, let's follow that theme throughout this paper. Yes, we know sandwiches will be the menu but before we can order, we have to decide where we will eat. So it is in this momentous task of providing care to multiple generations. When it comes to eating, we have several locations available--, "Home cooked", "Catered" or "Take out", and "Eat out".

"Home cooked" refers to food prepared and eaten at home. In the sandwich generation variation of this theme, I see this as bringing the cared for persons to your own residence, that is,

they move in with you. The caregiver is the homeowner, and provides care to at least two other generations.

"Catered" or "Take Out" means, in our mental-"sandwich generation"-picture, food prepared at another location. In this situation I see the caregiver moving into the home of a parent or grandparent, and bringing with them their own children. As house prices go up, as they have in San Diego, this will become a choice for some made just out of financial concerns. As a hospice chaplain I have encountered several clients whose children, niece, or grandchild have moved in to provide care, bringing their own families with them.

"Eating Out" is where the food is prepared and consumed at a restaurant or some other eating establishment. The picture I want to paint here is where the person receiving care is moved to a skilled nursing facility (SNF or "sniff") in healthcare lingo, or perhaps to an assisted living facility. More than 90% of the clients we serve as a hospice healthcare provider is to patients whose families have placed them into a skilled nursing facility because the medical care required became so demanding.

While the location of the care may differ from family to family or even change as the family cares for their loved ones over a period of time, that there will be care seems more and more certain. This is because some children live up to their description as the boomerang generation and come back home at the same time elderly parents need care. Balswick and Balswick sum it up by saying: "Thus the care of aging parents is more a question of how it is to be done than whether it will be done." (Balswick & Balswick, 1999, p. 178)

What's on the Menu at our Sandwich Shop? Unique Sandwich Styles

Traditional: Typically those sandwiched between aging parents who need care and/or help and their own children. Another variation of the “sandwich” is that the person or persons cared for are grandparents or perhaps an aunt or uncle. (Abaya, 2004, para 2)

Club Sandwich: This term, also coined by Carol Abaya, refers to those in their 50s or 60s, sandwiched between aging parents, adult children and grandchildren. It could also be used to describe those in their 30s and 40s, with young children, providing care to aging parents and grandparents or other relatives. (Abaya, 2004, para 3) We have relatives who had both sets of in-laws living with them, and after the death of both of their fathers, continue to have their mothers in the home.

Open Faced: Another term coined by Carol Abaya to refer to anyone else involved in elder care. (Abaya, 2004, para 4) An example of this setup is when a non-relative has become the caregiver to an elderly neighbor or someone in their church family.

Who's Serving the Sandwich Patrons?

The needs of the Sandwich Generation and those they care for are diverse and many. It takes various workers to serve up the sandwiches--sandwich makers, waiters and waitresses, busboys, dishwashers. A "Google" search of the term "sandwich generation" produced a list of websites that were geared to providing services to them.

The real estate industry has a keen interest in the sandwich generation because of the various needs involved for relocation. A case in point is the website report entitled “The Graying of America”, geared to realtors and making them aware of the many opportunities that the aging marketplace provides. (Corliss, 2003) Investors are also building or buying care facilities, often having independent living apartments, assisted living, and skilled nursing facilities on the same

property. Residents move from self-care to total care within the various facilities at the same location.

The financial industry has a tremendous interest in the unique needs of these baby boomers that make up the sandwich generation. Wills, trusts, the transfer of properties, insurance, legal work, and other financial planning is often set into place when the process of caregiving begins to the generations that make up the slices of bread in the sandwich analogy.

Healthcare is a key part of the sandwich generation picture. My job as a hospice chaplain is mandated by Medicare to be a part of the hospice healthcare team. Hospice is specialized healthcare provided to those who have been diagnosed as having 6 months or less to live. Patients can stay on longer because the time given is at best only a guess. The government wants these patients to have spiritual care as they deal with end-of-life (EOL) issues. On my core team is a registered nurse, a social worker, the volunteer coordinator, the bereavement coordinator, and the chaplain. We have doctors who we contract with as hospice physicians.

While hospice care may be provided to those of any age group, most of the patients are elderly who live in skilled nursing facilities. Those living in homes have their health needs met by our hospice home health providers. The amount of money it takes to meet the needs of the elderly is staggering!

Educational institutions are involved in several ways. First is that institutions are at the forefront of research as well as teaching. The University of Nebraska has chosen the Internet to deliver very practical helps to those who are caregivers, such as the article entitled "The Sandwich Generation: A Cluttered Nest". (Lingren & Decker, 1997)

Mental health providers service the mental and emotional needs of the caregivers as well as those who make up the slices of bread that the sandwich-- the elderly and the caregiver's children.

Psychiatrists prescribe enormous amounts of medication because of depression, psychosis, and mental illness associated with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Those in this MFT program would do well to look to this setting for future employment.

What's for dessert? Some Pleasant and Sweet Discoveries

“Sweet Positives” are very much a part of the menu for the sandwich generation. The AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) commissioned a study in 2001 to learn more about how members of this generation are responding to the demands of being sandwiched between two other generations for whom they are responsible to provide care. The analysis was based on the results of a national survey of 2,352 Americans between the ages of 45 and 55 at the time of the study. Conducted from March 8 to March 31, 2001, it used a random digit dial (RDD) sample. To accommodate a particular interest in differences among racial and ethnic groups, they oversampled minority members of the generation. The makeup of the study included interviews with 404 African Americans, 429 Hispanics, and 351 Asian Americans.

While “stressed with the demands of caregiving to their multigenerational family”, AARP made this discovery about the sandwich generation:

The survey results surprised us. We began the effort thinking that older baby boomers would feel enormously burdened by the dual demands of parenting and elder care. Yet the survey analysis sketches a different profile of these boomers--less stressed, more self-assured, and more at ease in their roles than not. (AARP, 2001, p. 1)

“Squeezed, But Not Stressed” was the conclusion reached from the “In the Middle” report. (AARP, 2001, p. 3) There was a resiliency, the capacity to bounce back, which characterized this

specific generation in their response to the tremendous demands upon them as caregivers. In answer to the question “How are they coping?” there came this powerful affirmation:

The AARP-sponsored survey reports that this generation may be squeezed, but it is not very stressed. Overall, our results describe a generation that is comfortable with and confident of its capacity to manage its family roles. Members of this generation welcome involvement in the care of their loved ones, but are cool to the thought of imposing their own future needs on their children. (AARP, 2001, p. 3)

Some of the key findings of the study are depicted in the following chapter headings: (a) “Family Life: Parents and Children Abound”, (b) “Positive Outlook”, (c) “Comfortable with Responsibilities”, (d) “A Few Cracks in Family Relationships, but Overall, Caring Brings Closeness”, (e) “Social Interactions Dominate Boomer Care for Parents”, and finally, (f) “Boomers Look First to Faith, Then Family, to Help Them Cope”. (AARP, 2001, pp. 6-7)

These findings are consistent with Erik Erikson’s Neopsychoanalytic Theory in which he proposed eight developmental stages that covered the entire life span. Generativity vs. Stagnation defined middle-aged adults whose positive contribution to the next generation was the focus of life. If a more selfish approach to life was chosen, the result was stagnation in Erikson’s theory. This survey by the AARP reveals middle adults whose willingness to care for their elderly parents as well as their children can certainly be described as Generativity, which Erikson saw as an adult’s ability to look outside oneself and care for others. (College of Education, University of Georgia. [COE-UGA], n.d., para 3)

Would you say grace as we eat our sandwich?

As a chaplain the faith factor is what excites me most in this survey. When asked about their own sources of assistance, cohort members who provide eldercare were most likely to

mention faith-related sources. Sixty-two percent draw strength from their faith and prayer, while 42 % have obtained support from religious institutions. In fact, faith and prayer were the most commonly cited sources of support for the baby boomers of this study as they fulfilled their assignment of providing care to their loved ones.

Initially I was concerned with the finding that only 42% found help from their community of faith. Often, this is because “out of sight, out of mind” for the spiritual leaders of our churches. That is to say that many of these people cannot attend or be involved in the life of the church and so they soon become forgotten. Many of the families of hospice patients feel estranged from their community of faith, as do their elderly parents.

After spiritual resources, the next most commonly mentioned sources of assistance were family and friends. Many of those who are described as family and friends are also the church. I believe the church is people—you and me—and we are touching many of these people with the love of God. And if people are the church, folk like you and me, then many of these caregivers are receiving support from their community of faith!

Let's visit awhile before we leave the Sandwich Shop

Good communication is a must when a decision is made regarding providing care for family members. There is so much that could be said in this area so I will leave it up to you to do further research here. Perhaps I will even write an article or two on the subject. But for now, lets just talk as if we had just finished our meal together. Here are a few suggestions I would offer to make this process go as easy as possible.

1. Understand this is difficult for everyone involved. Let your aged parents express themselves, to have a voice. On the other side of the sandwich, your children,

need to feel listened to as well. Everyone involved is going to be affected, so talk it out.

2. Put your listening skills to work, doing what is called active listening. Zero in on feelings. Use techniques that have a “love tug” inviting your loved ones to clarify their feelings. How? Phrases with the invitation to “tell me more”, such as “Oh?” or “How so?”. Re-phrasing what you heard or reframing what they said can be done by saying “You sound . . . afraid . . . unsure . . . relieved . . . angry . . . “. Doing so will substantiate the feelings of your loved one and expresses to them that you value them and their opinions and feelings.
3. Include the entire family in the communication process. This is no time to go solo, trying to do everything yourself. While the care of an aged parent often falls on one child, make sure the entire family is on board with the plan for care.

Taste and see that the Lord is good

In conclusion, let me describe what has just taken place this week in my wife’s family. We attended a memorial service for the wife of one of my wife’s cousins. We were with my wife’s parents and brothers and their wives. We are all people of strong faith and so scripture is important to our decision-making. We are all aware of the following passages at this time of our lives:

1. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD our God is giving you." (Exodus 20:12)
2. "Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you." (Deuteronomy 5:16)

3. "Honor your father and mother"--which is the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2)

Just before going our separate ways, we gathered in a circle in the parking lot of the church campus to pray. My father-in-law, our patriarch, led the prayer, asking God for guidance and direction in coming days and for courage to make right decisions. He was not specific in just what that guidance was nor what those right decisions involved, but there was "a knowing" for all of us that it involved their future in the final chapter of their lives. They do not want to be a burden. They know they need to move closer to one of their children in order not to be, since they live 700 miles from the closest child. And because we want to be obedient to the plan of God that we honor our parents, we have already decided that we will enjoy the "sandwich" that God prepares.

References

- AARP (2001, July 2001). In the middle: A report on multicultural boomers coping with family and aging issues. *In the middle: A report on multicultural boomers coping with family and aging issues. July 2001*, 131. Retrieved October 12, 2004, from http://research.aarp.org/il/in_the_middle.html
- Abaya, C. (2004, January 2, 2004). *The sandwich generation . . . helping your aging parents*. Retrieved October 22, 2004, from <http://www.globesyndicate.com/sand/2004/010204.html>
- Abaya, C. (n.d.). *The sandwich generation*. Retrieved October 12, 2004, from <http://www.sandwichgeneration.com/>
- Balswick, J. O., & Balswick, J. K. (1999). *The family: A Christian perspective on the contemporary home*. Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books.
- Berger, K. (2001). *The developing person through the life span* (5th ed.). Boston: Bronx Community College, CUNY.
- College of Education, University of Georgia (n.d.). *Erik Erikson's stage theory*. Retrieved October 28, 2004, from <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~cmims/Erikson/pages/stage7.html>
- Corliss, J. (2003). *Understanding the graying of America: What it can mean for your real estate market*. Retrieved October 22, 2004, from [www.realtor.org/Research.nsf/files/2003AnnualJCorlissResidential.ppt/\\$FILE/2003AnnualJCorlissResidential.ppt](http://www.realtor.org/Research.nsf/files/2003AnnualJCorlissResidential.ppt/$FILE/2003AnnualJCorlissResidential.ppt)
- Lingren, H. G., & Decker, J. (1997). The sandwich generation: a cluttered nest. *NebGuide*. Retrieved October 22, 2004, from <http://ianrpubs.unl.edu/family/g1117.htm>
- McFedries, P. (2004). *The wordspy: Sandwich generation*. Retrieved October 22, 2004, from <http://www.wordspy.com/words/sandwichgeneration.asp>