

A Cousin's Counsel



Roseanne was my favorite older cousin. Our dads were the brothers in a family of five, and they brought their children together from time to time throughout our childhoods to eat, fight, laugh, and otherwise take care of each other. Growing up, Roseanne and I developed our own firm friendship.

Now I was the favorite “once-removed” cousin for another, younger generation. Four of Roseanne’s children sat with me that Sunday morning around her dining room table. Ted, Roseanne’s second husband, was sitting beside her in the living room, watching birds in their wooded backyard. They were peaceful with Roseanne’s decision to die at home. Her children weren’t.

When I was a teenaged babysitter, they had been my favorite assignment. It was hard to resist Claire’s kindergarten giggle, Chandler’s open, first-grade smile, Amy’s impish nursery-school grin, and Jonathan’s boundless toddler energy. Now their grim, adult expressions reflected the reality of their impending losses.

These grown-up people with their tired, careworn faces were anything but peaceful. “*Do something about Claire!*” Amy had pleaded the night before, in the lobby of the hospice unit where I had spent the afternoon with Roseanne. “*Claire is determined that when Mom comes home tomorrow, we will be the only ones to take care of her because we’re the nurses! What about the boys? They want to help. They need to help, and Claire won’t let them!*” She finished, “*Please, Cousin! She’ll listen to you.*”

As a child, Claire had been passionate and intense, quick to judgment. She was so stubborn when she thought she was right that I sometimes had to guard my face lest I break into laughter as I carried her away from one more neighborhood fight. Leading her away from her convictions in this battle would not be so easy.

But we accomplished it. The siblings devised rules and roles which honored each one's wishes as well as the limitations which they could voice. And somehow, we made those admissions possible.

It was a "family council." They showed up. They talked. I refereed and took notes. As a beloved outsider, I could set the playground rules, and hold an honorable place for each one to take and leave as needed.

As a result, everyone got an assignment. Chandler took charge of scheduling siblings, family and friends to provide for his mom's care 24/7. Jonathan, by contrast, asked for a share of the caregiving, and agreed to be trained by Claire. Amy wanted shifts that would allow her to be home when her kids got back from school. And Claire – who stormed out of the room only once that morning and then came back – agreed to be bound by the caregiving "guidelines" we put together.

The result was a family plan to take care of their mom that the siblings themselves could sustain for more than a day or a week at a time. It was workable, flexible, and inclusive, and they owned it.

After a noisy, crowded family celebration held around her that Thanksgiving, Roseanne died peacefully in the night. Claire was the family caregiver with her at the time.

Significant Lesson:

"Caregiving is a temporary stage in a relationship which will take you to a level of compassion that you have never before experienced. ... It's not the disease; it's the level of giving that changes your life."

-- Beth Witrogen McLeod (2000).