

Fortysomething: Tug of War

September 10, 2015 by Brette Sember

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I am the mother of a 23-year-old daughter and the daughter of a 70-year-old mother. What each wants from me and what I want to give each are polar opposites. And somehow, I am both of them at the same time.

My daughter moved out last year to live on her own and go to medical school. There is a painful hole in my life. Although she is in the same city, we see her once a week for two hours if she has time. She answers my texts most of the time. I haven't been to her apartment in three months. Although I have a younger son, her moving out was a difficult separation for me. I loved seeing her smile and treasured being part of her everyday life when she lived at home. I'm happy to see her become independent and find her wings, and although I am past the wanting-to-cry-every-day stage because she is so missed, I've uneasily settled into a role of waiting to be wanted. When she needs me, I'm there. When she doesn't, I am learning that parenting an adult child means getting on with your own life. But it doesn't stop me from thinking of her all the time and wishing I had more time with her. I want her more than she wants me. My love for her is aching, deep, and strong. Her love for me is steady and understated.

My mother is aging, but in good health herself. My father has some serious health and mobility problems, which means that my mom mostly stays home to care for him. Her world is growing smaller, narrowed down to a 15-minute radius around their snowbird home in Florida. She's lonely. Their friends have left the area, died, become ill, and otherwise moved on. Whereas for most of my life I was just a piece of her world, I'm now becoming central. She needs me more. She wants me to fly down for frequent visits, talk on the phone, text, and email her, although I can sense her gentle control of her own neediness. I carry around a backpack of guilt because I know she wants more than I'm giving. I have my own complicated life to manage; that is my main focus, and I struggle to find the time she needs from me. She wants me more than I want her. Her love for me is aching, deep, and strong. My love for her is steady and understated.

Because I am a daughter, I understand where my own daughter is in her life. It's her time to change the world, live it up, experience everything, and be free. Spending time with her mom is not a priority at this stage in her life.

Because I am a mother, I understand where my own mother is in her life. She misses her only daughter and wants as much of me as she can get. She's increasingly isolated, and I'm becoming more important in her life as it narrows. Spending time with her feels as if it needs to be a priority in my life.

But because I am both daughter and mother, I'm stuck in a no-man's-land in the middle. My mother pulls me and my daughter pushes me. I often feel I'm walking along a very high, very narrow mountain ridge. I could easily tip too far in either direction and shortchange my mother or overwhelm my daughter. It is a wonderful gift to be able to completely understand how they both feel about me and grasp how their needs are dictated by their place in life. However, while I need and love them both, where do I look for guidance in navigating the waters of my own life divided by these two competing currents?

The only answer I have is to think less about what I need and more about what they need. If I focus on being the person they each need me to be, I know that at least their needs are met. But who then answers mine?

Brette Sember is the author of more than 40 books and is a freelancer, social media manager, content specialist, book doctor, indexer, and ghostwriter. Her web site is [brettesember.com](#)

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