

THE NAVIGATOR

Charting your Course for a Purposeful Life
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Opportunity ~~Lost~~ Found

Modern healthcare has made it possible for many to live very long lives. This can create money and legal concerns that need to be planned with financial advisors and attorneys. What can get lost in the preparation for these practical steps is that an exceptionally long life can bring about psychological challenges as well.

Several years ago, when I was planning an event for wealthy, successful individuals and families, and was lining up speakers to address engaging topics, I asked Domingo P. Such, III ([Such bio](#)), a brilliant attorney from Chicago, to present a session. I told him to choose the topic, anything he wanted.

What he decided to talk about was the many health challenges that can plague wealthy benefactors as they age and, without in-depth preparation, the devastating effects these challenges can have on relationships in the rising generations. Since that talk, I have regularly checked in with my clients about their estate planning, always including their preparation for the many kinds of later-life decline.

I have had plenty of time to think about this as my own mother struggles with her advancing Alzheimer's. My parents did much to prepare: they had purchased and funded a long-term healthcare policy that was an excellent investment, and they had attended to estate planning. We now have their skilled professionals to work with. I am very grateful they addressed many financial and logistical questions for us. However, my mother's decline raised questions regarding our personal relationship.

When the movie *Still Alice* came out, I was excited to have the chance to learn from it. Mainly, I learned to talk to my mother with the respect that she is *still there*, validating her fears, assuring her that I would feel afraid, too, and encouraging her with curiosity like, "Tell me more about how you really are..." I resist the temptation to talk to her like I would to a toddler, and I'll admit it is difficult to resist at times. She can't remember much except at random times, she is legally blind, and she can't hear very well. She says she has been here too long. Consequently, I can't help being saddened when I think of her quality of life.



The Navigator is a quarterly newsletter for all who have an interest in wealth. The rich really are different, but not in the ways most people think. Many envy the wealthy and presume they have no problems, but in fact, they face unique psychological challenges. Thayer Willis, LCSW, wealth counselor, speaker and author of *Navigating the Dark Side of Wealth: A Life guide for Inheritors*, helps her clients develop the meaningful lives we all treasure.

However, there has been one silver lining for me in her decline, one that I would have never predicted. From my own childhood through adulthood, until the onset of my mother's physical decline, she and I had a contentious relationship, very contentious at times. We did our best to get along, but overwhelmingly, I have memories of her telling me in no uncertain terms that I could have done better in many of the choices I made. She had high standards and was extremely ambitious. It seemed to me that nothing I did was ever good enough. So I pushed back, and our relationship was strained for many decades. Eventually I learned to manage our relationship—and for the last thirty years before she entered dementia, we got along all right, not great, but all right. But all along I wished and hoped we could be on better terms.

And now, since the dementia set in, she has become sweet, kind, and compliant. I never leave a visit with her without receiving multiple compliments—compliments about how I look, what I do, and sometimes compliments about my very character. She never criticizes me. What a silver lining to have while present for her decline! Naturally, I have questioned what has happened. My theory is that ambition is necessarily fueled by the past and the future. She no longer has either. She lives entirely in the present, and there is absolutely no context for ambition. It took a while but now I feel relaxed around her, and allow myself to be real with her. It is an unexpected gift.

And I wonder how our relationship has shaped my life. Would I have developed the fighting spirit and mettle in my twenties to build inner strength and make a life for myself? Would I have prioritized my children highly and always looked for ways to encourage and praise them? Would I have persevered and built a successful business, with all of the inevitable ups and downs? Maybe I didn't reject my mother's ambition; maybe I inherited it, adapted it to me, and fueled my own dreams with it. And now, wonder of all wonders, now I get to have some loving time with her.

My message to you is this: take care of your relationships with the older generations of your family, talk with your siblings, advisors, and trusted friends about all aspects of care in later life. Read an excellent new book written by our doctor, Elizabeth Eckstrom, and her co-author, Marcy Cottrell Houle, "[The Gift of Caring: Saving our Parents from the Perils of Modern Healthcare](#)". This book is full of practical advice to help guide you to the best healthcare decisions. Glean what you can learn and set up methods to deal with financial, legal, and health concerns in ways that fit your family. Contact your attorney to review and update what you have. Carve out the time and commitment to do it. In doing so you, too, may discover an unexpected silver lining in the clouds that can gather in the sunset of a life.

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