

Role Reversal (2007)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

I went to Philadelphia to visit my second son, Christopher, and wound up in the hospital. I got to experience the Emergency Room of enormous Jefferson Hospital for eleven hours one day, got repaired the next morning, and was paroled just after noon. So it turned out fine.

But what I noticed, while this was going on, was an unusual degree of solicitude by that aforementioned son. When we went by cab to the hospital, he got right testy with the driver, who couldn't find the ER and had to make an extra round of the block — and he kept reaching for my things to carry them, and saying, "Here, let me, Dad," which made me want to grab things back.

Then it began to sink in. What we had going on there is the same thing I observed when my beloved mother came to live with us when she was 88 and could no longer do it on her own. For the next five years, until her death, we reversed the stages that began our life together, from when I was a wordless, squirming mass of vulnerability until I was a first-grader. She started at about the first grade level, then proceeded to jump the hoops back down that obstacle course until she could jump no more.

So that's what I was seeing, and feeling. My son did not ask for extra duty when the original three days stretched to a week, and his schedule changed markedly. It included some middle-of-the-night quick deciding when you're dead asleep, some telephone calls when you don't have the information and have to make half of it up, some explanation to his siblings of why he'd let me get hospitalized. He responded marvelously. He switched gears from what he was supposed to be doing to what he had to be doing, waited for my uncertainties to pass, comforted and clucked like a mother hen. I need to ask him if he knew what was happening — that role reversal, as I'm becoming the Caree, he the Carer. He was the one that drew this duty, among his three siblings: but if this is the way

the rest of them respond in the future, I think things will be done pretty well.

It felt strange. Well, it felt awful. No, it felt wonderful, to be cared for that much — and to see that mature, capable, self-confident guy being so tender.

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Houston Hodges has been a Presbyterian minister for over fifty years; now he preaches once a month at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church out in Hampton Cove.