

UNITED WISDOM

“But I Did Everything for Them”

Relationships and Shared Life

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When care creates distance—and how to bring the other person back into it

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> ***Archival translation note.*** *This full translation retains the original article’s research limitations and source-check records. Those records describe work reported in the accepted Russian archive, not fresh verification performed for this English package. Quotations are translated from the Russian article and have not been newly checked against the named English editions.*
>
> *“The rule for the giver and receiver of a benefit: one should immediately forget what was given, the other should never forget what was received.”*
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> *Seneca, On Benefits, II.10. Editorial translation for the original article from Aubrey Stewart’s English edition. 1*

What This Article Is About

A person can sincerely care for loved ones without noticing what it is like for them to live inside that care. They remember sleepless nights, money spent, a job found, advice given in time. The others may remember decisions made without them, constant checking, and the impossibility of refusing without becoming ungrateful. When relationships fall apart, both sides produce real memories—and scarcely recognize a shared life in them. This article explores the gap between intending to help and what help does to another person. It matters to preserve the complexity: real good does not exclude pain caused, and another’s hurt does not prove malicious intent. Through everyday scenes, psychological research, and several philosophical and religious texts, we will follow how protection becomes restriction, a gift acquires conditions, and involvement turns into a bill. We will also consider what changes when the recipient gains the right to describe their experience.

All everyday scenes below are composites, not reconstructions of a particular family. Research, philosophical arguments, and statements of faith have different standing; comparing them here does not amount to scientific confirmation of religious teachings.

I. Two Stories of One Action

“But I did everything for them,” says someone whose children have almost stopped speaking to them. Something has gone wrong with friends too. They list whom they helped, whom they rescued, whom they worried about. Their account contains many actions that genuinely demanded effort, money, and time. Perhaps none of it is exaggerated. That makes the present silence even more painful: so much invested, and nobody nearby.

A listener wants to restore justice quickly. Call the loved ones ungrateful. Or pronounce the speaker a controlling person now paying for their behavior. But one account cannot tell us that. A harder possibility is that the person loved and helped while also making the relationship constricting for someone else.

A father arranges a job for his adult son. He asks acquaintances, makes arrangements, and rejoices in the good salary. The son had planned to do something else. He said so several times, but the conversation ended with “You do not understand how life works yet.” Now refusal is even harder: the father has already asked on his behalf, and people are waiting. Years later, one will remember opening a path; the other will remember being unable to choose his own.

In chapter XVIII of the *Zhuangzi*, the ruler of Lu receives a seabird with honors: he arranges music and offers wine and sacrificial meat. The frightened bird neither eats nor drinks and dies. This is a parable about incompatible ways of life, not a historical record. The ruler offered the bird the goods of the human world without recognizing its own conditions of existence. 2

What is frightening in this story is precisely the absence of obvious malice. The honors are real, the expenditure real, the conception of beauty real too. Only the intended recipient has gone unnoticed. In family life the consequences are usually less spectacular: a person falls silent, stops sharing, visits less often. Outward generosity may continue.

The first question therefore concerns something other than the number of good deeds. We need to understand whether the offered good fitted the recipient’s life. Could they refuse the job, gift, or advice? Were they heard when explaining that they needed something different? The possibility of correcting help distinguishes a shared decision from someone else’s plan into which we were placed without discussion.

II. When Advice Prevents Someone from Finishing

Help can miss a need even without direct coercion. A friend describes a difficult month. The listener gets involved: you should change jobs, stop postponing that conversation with your wife, go to bed earlier. They think, offer solutions, spend the evening. But the speaker first wanted to finish and be beside someone with whom they did not have to defend every decision.

Another version looks gentler still. A woman tells a friend she is afraid of upcoming changes. “Oh, stop it, everything will be fine,” she hears. The friend wanted to encourage her. Now she must either pretend to feel relieved or prove that the fear has grounds. The conversation about her experience ends before there has been room for it.

Actions can miss a need in the same way. A father buys his son everything he dreamed of in his own childhood. The son is waiting for him at a school performance. A husband takes on extra projects for the family. His wife tries to say that she misses evenings together. The purchases and paid bills remain real contributions, but they do not answer the request that was voiced.

In Natalya Maisel and Shelly Gable’s 2009 study, based on diaries from 67 cohabiting couples, support’s responsiveness mattered: how far it took the recipient into account. Favorable associations with well-being and relationships appeared for both visible and invisible help when it was responsive. These are observational data, not a universal prescription. But they prevent reducing the issue to “help only when asked.” 3

Unsolicited help may be welcome. Someone noticed exhaustion, brought dinner, offered to collect a child. Help becomes unwanted in relation to a particular recipient’s experience; it becomes imposed when their objections stop changing anything. These words describe different situations, and confusing them is inconvenient above all for the relationship itself.

In a 2024 paper, A. D. Schulz and colleagues studied unwanted help at work. In two surveys with 279 and 165 participants, it was associated with frustration of autonomy and competence. A workplace context cannot be transferred directly to family estrangement, and surveys do not establish causality. Nevertheless, experiencing help as an obstacle became something measured, not merely an everyday complaint. 4

In conversation, the distinction can be tested simply: can I say “What matters more right now is that you listen” and remain a good friend? If this clarification is taken as an insult, discussing the need gives way to defending the helper. Someone already struggling must also soothe the person who intended to support them.

III. Protection You Cannot Leave

Care especially readily becomes restrictive when another person's independence frightens us. A mother calls her adult daughter several times a day. She asks where she is, why she is late, whom she is seeing. If there is no answer, she calls again. Her anxiety may be completely sincere. But the daughter acquires a duty to confirm continually that everything is fine so her mother can calm down.

The daughter asks for fewer calls. "Am I supposed not to take any interest in you at all now?" comes the answer. Instead of discussing call frequency, she is offered a choice between continuous reporting and no interest. Love and anxiety can coexist here with a demand: organize your life so that I do not have to feel uncertainty.

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory distinguishes needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this framework, autonomy means experiencing one's own assent to an action, not necessarily independence from people. We can willingly accept support and retain authorship of our lives; we can formally do everything ourselves while obeying others' expectations. This is a psychological theory, not an exhaustive account of a person. 5

In *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran expresses this separateness poetically: "You may give them your love, but not your thoughts." Children already have thoughts and a future of their own. The formulation does not release parents from responsibility; it limits the claim to live a child's life on their behalf. 6

In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill addresses another level: the limits of social coercion. Merely believing that something would be better for someone is insufficient grounds for power over their choice. His argument concerns people with mature capacities, not every age and circumstance indiscriminately. Applying it to family life here is a philosophical analogy, not a ready legal answer. 7

For the father in the first scene, the distinction becomes practical: he can offer an introduction to an employer while leaving the son free to refuse. The father is entitled to state the limits of his money and resources. But rejecting an offer does not necessarily mean rejecting the father. While the two refusals remain fused, a child must pay for their own path with the feeling that they are destroying the relationship.

IV. Obedience Does Not Yet Mean Closeness

Outward agreement can be a poor witness to what happens between people. Someone answers the phone, visits, gives thanks, chooses words carefully. To one person this proves family closeness. To another it is a way to avoid another difficult conversation. Years can pass like this before the distance becomes visible to both sides.

In two studies of Israeli ninth-graders, Guy Roth, Avi Assor, and colleagues distinguished conditional negative and positive parental regard. In samples of 169 and 156 adolescents, withdrawing regard when expectations were not met was associated with resentment; increasing regard when expectations were met was associated with internal compulsion. Autonomy support was associated with a sense of choice. The design was correlational: it does not prove that these practices caused the consequences, nor explain the history of every adult family. 8

It is important not to declare every expression of parental approval dangerous. The issue is making regard depend on the required behavior. A child may try less for the activity itself than to recover warmth. Good grades or habitual compliance then tell us little about how comfortable the child feels being themselves around their parents.

Help can also sting through another message: “You cannot manage on your own.” In laboratory experiments by Niall Bolger and David Amarel before an anticipated speech, subtly provided support reduced emotional reactivity more effectively than explicitly identified support. The authors associated the advantage with help not creating the impression that the helper considered the recipient incapable of coping. This was a restricted experimental situation involving female students; it does not imply that “help should be given secretly.” 9

Imagine a grandmother arriving to help with a baby. She really does let her daughter sleep, prepares food, cleans. At the same time, she corrects every movement, rearranges things, and explains that her daughter is doing everything wrong. The practical benefit is obvious. Yet after the visit, the young mother may feel less able to care for her own child.

Gratitude for a prepared meal and a request to stop constant remarks therefore do not contradict each other. A relationship becomes constricting if acknowledging its benefits is permitted only alongside approval of the entire way one is treated. Distance sometimes becomes the last available way to separate what could not be separated in words. Sometimes, but not always: withdrawal alone does not establish its cause.

V. A Gift with an Unknown Price

Help changes meaning when its conditions are announced after it has been accepted. Parents give money for an apartment. Nobody agrees that the young family must now visit every weekend and seek approval for decisions. These obligations emerge at the first disagreement: “After everything we have done for you.”

The gift has already been accepted. Now it turns out to have included a contract the recipient never saw. The same happens without money: “I was always on your side” becomes a demand to support any position; “I devoted my life to you” becomes a duty to live one’s own life so that another person’s sacrifice appears justified.

Yet gratitude and indebtedness are not identical. In studies by N. Goyal and colleagues published in 2022, indebtedness decreased after an opportunity to reciprocate help, while gratitude remained. The data came from an online game and scenario studies. They distinguish experiences without dividing everyone into the selfless and the calculating. 10

A more uncomfortable nuance exists too. In Gao and colleagues’ 2024 paper, indebtedness included guilt about the helper’s costs and obligation linked to a presumed expectation of repayment. Guilt could arise precisely when care was perceived as sincere. The research used surveys, an experimental game, and modeling; it does not allow us to infer a giver’s intention from another person’s feeling of obligation. 11

Thus “I feel obliged” does not always mean “I am being manipulated.” Sometimes receiving is difficult for someone; sometimes help required too great a sacrifice; sometimes conditions really are hidden. Understanding requires moving closer to the circumstances: what was promised, what was assumed, what is now demanded, and whether it can be discussed.

In the second book of *On Benefits*, Seneca warns against reproaching people with a gift while also requiring recipients to remember kindness. These duties address different parties; one does not become a right to enforce the other. In a modern family, gratitude for education can be genuine even if a child chooses another profession. Appreciation of a friend survives disagreement. Help matters, but its meaning is not measured by lifelong obedience. 1

VI. Good Spoiled by Reproach

In several religious traditions, a gift’s quality depends on how it is given and what happens afterward. These are not modern manuals of personal boundaries. Their meaning concerns faith, virtue, and a person’s relationship with a higher order. Yet precisely these different foundations make comparison substantial: a similar question arises within systems that cannot be reduced to one another.

In the Quran's surah Al-Baqarah, verses 262–264 connect the value of charity with the absence of later reproaches and hurt. Mustafa Khattab's English translation explicitly warns against devaluing charity through reminders of generosity. The passage concerns a religious act and its reward before Allah. Applying it to a family conversation is our analogy: subsequent treatment can change the meaning of help already given. 12

In *Bhagavad Gita* 17.20, a gift in the mode of goodness is described as given at the proper place and time, to a worthy recipient, "without expecting anything in return"—an editorial translation from Swami Mukundananda. This belongs to the teaching of the three gunas, not a claim that recipients always know best what is useful. Yet attention is directed both to the motive for giving and its appropriateness. 13

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, distributing possessions does not by itself replace love. Love is then described as "not seeking its own." In the chapter's context this is Christian instruction to a community, not a psychological test for selflessness. It asks the giver what makes an action an expression of love if the scale of sacrifice alone is insufficient. 14

These texts do not speak identically. The Quran speaks of charity and reward; the Gita of the quality of action within the gunas; Paul of love as a condition of an action's spiritual value. Their common ground is limited but substantial: the transferred object and the moral meaning of its transfer do not automatically coincide. One cannot be measured solely by the quantity of the other.

Imagine someone who helped a friend through a difficult period and then returns them to that period in every argument: "Have you forgotten the state I picked you up from?" The past help may have saved a great deal. Repeated reproach simultaneously fixes inequality in place. The recipient is condemned to be, again and again, the helpless person they have ceased to be. Gratitude has almost no room for free expression.

VII. Why the Helper Hurts So Much Too

A helper's hurt deserves attention even when their demands cannot be accepted. Behind "I did everything for them" may lie the question "Did my life really mean nothing to them?" If someone understood themselves through being indispensable for many years, loved ones' independence can feel like the disappearance of their own place.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.7, Aristotle notes an asymmetry: in his observation, benefactors are often more attached to recipients than recipients are to them. He considers the comparison with creditor and debtor but offers a deeper explanation through love of one's own work: the benefactor sees the result of their activity in the other. This is philosophical reasoning, not an experimentally established law. 15

It suggests an unsettling question for our subject. How far can I rejoice in someone who has moved beyond my design? A parent helped a son study, but the son chose an unexpected profession. A mentor invested much in a student, but the student developed different views. If another's difference feels like damage to one's own creation, the relationship begins to serve the helper's authorship.

The helper may also be living without freedom. A woman always agrees to come over, even when exhausted. A man takes extra work because otherwise he considers himself a bad father. Later, accumulated exhaustion is presented to loved ones as a debt. They may not know what the help cost, especially if every inquiry was answered with "It is no trouble at all."

In four studies in 2010, Netta Weinstein and Richard Ryan examined voluntary and controlled motivation for helping. More favorable outcomes for helpers and recipients were associated with autonomous motivation. Autonomy here concerns the helper primarily; it cannot be substituted with the recipient's consent. Nor do the data imply that a sense of duty is always destructive. 16

The Buddhist discourse AN 5.148 names, among the qualities of a gift, help that harms neither oneself nor others. This is instruction on good giving within a religious understanding of karmic consequences. For our comparison, what matters is that caring for another does not automatically require erasing the giver. 17

Acknowledging the limits of one's strength can be more honest than giving beyond one's capacity and then demanding repayment for an entire unlived life. "I need support too" leaves the other person a chance to respond. An unannounced sacrifice offered no such chance and now demands payment.

VIII. Help After Which the Helper Can Become Less Necessary

Care faces a difficult test: what happens when someone becomes less dependent on us? Do we rejoice in their possibilities, or begin looking for evidence that without our involvement they will go wrong again? The answer need not be beautiful. We can feel joy and sadness at once, sensing that a former role has ended.

In *Mishneh Torah*, *Gifts to the Poor* 10:7, Maimonides describes the highest level of charity: supporting someone through a gift, loan, partnership, or work so they need not ask others. This is a halakhic prescription for helping a person in need within a specific communal context. It must not become a standard by which every dependent person is judged a failure of care. Yet it clearly names an outcome beyond the next handout. 18

In Brooke Feeney and R. L. Thrush's 2010 study of 167 married couples, secure-base qualities were described through "availability, noninterference, and encouragement"—an editorial

translation. These were associated with a partner's exploratory behavior in the situation studied. This is not proof for every family, but it offers a useful image: presence can help someone act without taking their place. 19

The father offering his son a job need not disappear from his life. He can make an introduction, discuss risks, help form a plan, and say what support he can offer. He can also bear a decision he would not choose himself. The bond then survives through the possibility of returning to conversation, rather than an obligation to follow a route already laid out.

In chapter 51 of the *Dao De Jing*, the Dao generates and nourishes beings without possessing or ruling them. The brief phrase "generates without claiming ownership" conveys part of that image in the editors' translation from James Legge. This is a metaphysical description of the Dao's action, not a theory of parenting. We borrow from it an image of involvement that need not end in possession. 20

Yet not all help ends in independence. A small child, someone with severe limitations, or an aging loved one may need long-term care. Respect can be expressed within dependence too: asking about visit times, preserving choices the person can make, explaining an action, and not discussing them as though absent. Care does not lose its value where making the recipient fully independent is impossible.

IX. When Intervention Is Still Needed

Respect for freedom offers no ready justification for inaction. A parent stops a small child at the road. A friend refuses to lend more money they cannot afford to lose. A spouse sets a limit on treatment that harms them. The other person may become angry, but an unpleasant experience does not itself make these actions wrong.

In his argument about a child drowning in a shallow pond, the philosopher Peter Singer asks about a duty to help when serious harm can be prevented at small cost. He recounts the argument from his 1972 essay *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* on his own website. It is a counterexample to requiring a formally expressed request every time. Its original purpose is to justify helping people in extreme poverty; analogy with a family situation has limits. 21

A great distance separates immediate danger from an adult son's disapproved-of profession. Relevant to justifying intervention are the seriousness and proximity of harm, the person's ability to decide, and available less restrictive actions. These questions do not become a universal instruction or legal consultation here. They help prevent substituting our displeasure with someone's choice for danger.

A common opposite mistake occurs too: after a conversation about boundaries, someone disappears in hurt. "Since I do everything wrong, I will stop getting involved altogether." Yet

between management and withdrawal lie many forms of participation. We can offer specific help, make agreements, remain available without requiring immediate acceptance.

In a 2015 theoretical review, Feeney and Nancy Collins consider support both in difficulty and in exploring new opportunities. This is a research model, not a separate experiment: loved ones can provide a base during adversity and support development beyond it. Care is not exhausted by rescuing the helpless; it includes interest in what a person can do themselves. 22

Still, sometimes recipients really do act dishonestly: accepting help on agreed terms and breaking the agreement, devaluing another's work, demanding ever more. An adult conversation must allow this possibility too. One person's freedom does not mean another's endless duty to sustain it with money and time. Helpers are entitled to stop; what matters is naming their own limit without turning it into a verdict on the recipient's entire character.

X. What This Means in Practice

Change begins with a willingness to clarify one's help. Before acting, we can ask what is needed now: listening, thinking together, or doing something concrete. It is also worth stating real limits: "I can come for two hours," "I am lending this amount until the agreed date," "I am willing to help with the search; the decision remains yours." Clear conditions do not make involvement cold; they reduce the room for later accusations.

While helping, it is useful to notice the recipient's corrections. "This is uncomfortable for me," "I want to try myself," "Please do not tell others about this"—these are information about what is happening. They may upset us, but do not yet mean all care is rejected. If necessary, we can discuss our own needs without forcing the other person first to confirm our faultlessness.

In the instruction to Rahula, MN 61, actions are to be examined before, during, and after performance: do they harm "oneself, others, or both"—in the editors' translation from Thanissaro Bhikkhu? In the Buddhist text, this examination belongs to moral education and purification of conduct. It gives our subject an important turn: good intentions can be refined as new experience appears. 23

If pain has already been caused, the general declaration "I meant well" tells only part of the story. A more concrete conversation sounds different: "I found you a job, but would not hear that you planned to do something else." Or: "When you asked me to call less often, I accused you of indifference." An action is named that can be discussed and changed, without requiring an entire life to be declared a mistake.

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant proposes treating a person also as an end, never merely as a means. This is a moral principle, not a promise of a favorable

outcome. In our case it also limits the wish to use reconciliation as confirmation of our goodness: the other person is entitled not to restore closeness immediately. 24

Let us return to the person saying, “But I did everything for them.” Perhaps much of what they did truly mattered. Acknowledging someone else’s pain does not cancel that meaning. But an encounter is difficult while loved ones are permitted only a version of the past in which every involvement was beneficial.

A different conversation might begin with: “I remember how much I did for you. Now I want to understand what it was like for you to be with me then.” After that, we need to bear an answer we did not choose and let it change how we care next time.

Key Quotation

> *“Act so that humanity, in your own person and in the person of every other, is always also an end, never merely a means.”*
>
> *Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, section II, AA 4:429. Editorial translation for the original article from Thomas Kingsmill Abbott’s English translation. 24*

Connections Between Traditions and Research

This is a map of comparisons, not proof of a single teaching. Similarity of questions does not cancel differences in foundations.

Shared question	Lines compared	Intersection and boundary
Does the gift take its recipient into account?	*Zhuangzi*, XVIII ↔ Maisel and Gable, 2009	Care mismatched to a way of life ↔ responsive support. A parable is not an experiment.
Can help deteriorate after it is given?	Seneca, II ↔ Quran, 2:262–264 ↔ Gita, 17.20	Reproach, hurt, and expected repayment change the quality of giving. Stoic virtue, religious reward, and gunas are not identical.
Can we love while leaving choice intact?	Gibran, “On Children” ↔ Ryan and Deci, 2000 ↔ Roth and colleagues, 2009	A loved one’s separateness ↔ autonomy ↔ conditional regard. Poetry is compared with theory and correlational data.

Shared question	Lines compared	Intersection and boundary
How much does the size of a sacrifice mean?	1 Corinthians 13 ↔ Weinstein and Ryan, 2010 ↔ Aristotle, IX.7	Love, helping motivation, and attachment to one's work ask different questions of a sacrifice. The amount given does not explain it fully.
What remains for a person after help?	Maimonides, 10:7 ↔ Feeney and Thrush, 2010 ↔ *Dao De Jing*, 51	Leaving need behind ↔ a base for action ↔ nourishment without possession. Charitable prescription, observation, and metaphysics retain their meanings.
How can good intention be examined?	MN 61 ↔ Kant, AA 4:429 ↔ Feeney and Collins, 2015	Consequences of action ↔ personal dignity ↔ support for development. No line guarantees reconciliation or replaces knowledge of circumstances.

Primary Texts and Research

Russian passages from English editions were translated by the original editors; they are not quotations from unspecified Russian translations. The archive reports scientific findings within its checked access. For classical works, the named chapters and passages were checked; complete reading of every treatise is not claimed. The following check descriptions are inherited records, not new verification for this translation.

1. **Seneca. *On Benefits*, II.10–11; compared with V.21–22.** Aubrey Stewart's English edition, Project Gutenberg. Gifts, reproach, and reciprocity; epigraph and section V. Text.

2. **Zhuangzi, chapter XVIII.** *Chuang Tzŭ: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, translated by Herbert Allen Giles. Seabird parable; section I. Text.

3. **Maisel, N. C.; Gable, S. L. (2009).** *The Paradox of Received Social Support: The Importance of Responsiveness*. Psychological Science, 20, 928–932. Diaries of 67 couples; archive check: publisher abstract. Section II. DOI / publisher.

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12. **Quran. Surah 2, Al-Baqarah, verses 262–264.** Mustafa Khattab's English translation, *The Clear Quran*. Charity without reproach; section VI. Text.

13. **Bhagavad Gita, 17.20.** English translation by Swami Mukundananda. Giving in the mode of goodness; verse distinguished from commentary. Section VI. Text and commentary.

14. **Paul. First Letter to the Corinthians, 13:3–5.** Russian Synodal translation. Sacrifice and love; section VI. Text.

15. **Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.7.** W. D. Ross's English translation, Internet Classics Archive. A benefactor's attachment to their work; section VII. Text.

16. **Weinstein, N.; Ryan, R. M. (2010).** *When Helping Helps: Autonomous Motivation for Prosocial Behavior and Its Influence on Well-Being for the Helper and Recipient*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98, 222–244. Archive check: published PDF, abstract, and methods of studies 1, 3, and 4. Section VII. DOI.

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19. **Feeney, B. C.; Thrush, R. L. (2010).** *Relationship Influences on Exploration in Adulthood: The Characteristics and Function of a Secure Base*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98, 57–76. Archive check: abstract and an indexed passage from the author manuscript; section VIII. PMC.

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23. **MN 61. Ambalaṭṭhika-Rāhulovāda Sutta.** English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Examining actions before, during, and after; section X. Archive check: the relevant teaching passage. Text.

24. **Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), section II, AA 4:429.** Thomas Kingsmill Abbott's English translation. Formula of humanity; section X and closing quotation. Text.

Tags

Care, help, good intentions, autonomy, freedom, gratitude, indebtedness, reciprocity, dignity, parenting, adult children, friendship, relationships, family boundaries, conditional regard, support, responsiveness, competence, hurt, gift, sacrifice, paternalism, independence, moral responsibility, philosophy, psychology, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, inner change, United Wisdom.

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