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Elderly teach a lesson in how to let go

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Reader comments: Suggested by Marilyn Hannon of Novi.

Eventually, we've learned, he couldn't even ride his beloved horse without making dangerous mistakes.

The Secret Service agent who rode with him for years finally told Nancy Reagan, "Ma'am, I can't protect him from himself." It's time, he said, that the outdoorsman stop riding, with both age and Alzheimer's disease as opponents.

"You have to tell him," she said.

"Mrs. Reagan, I can't do that," he replied.

"He'll take it better coming from you," she insisted.

And so John Barletta, a protector-turned-friend, knocked on Ronald Reagan's study door and said, "Sir, we had a tough time today and it's getting worse. . . . Maybe you shouldn't ride anymore."

As Barletta told this story last week to CNN's Paula Zahn, he had tears in his eyes. He said he was weeping that day, too. But Reagan, he said, "got up off his chair and put his hands on my shoulder and looked at me and said, 'It's OK, John. I know.' "

They never spoke about riding again.

Coming to terms with endings

I envy the way the elderly surrender to endings.

I envy the serenity with which they say good-bye to friends who precede them in death.

I envy how frankly they talk about what they can no longer do.

They do not rage at the unfairness of it all. They do not see unfairness. They see a thread, so short it will end before they'd like, but so long they feel grateful.

Two days before Ronald Reagan's funeral, we learned that our next-door neighbors, in their mid-80s, are moving to a senior-living center near Holland, near their son. They say they can no longer keep up their house and yard as well as it deserves.

"What will happen to your sailboat?" I asked. He's kept his boat in the marina here for decades. He sails less than he once did, because his wife won't let him go out alone, but he seeks out companions, including my husband, who join him now and again on the water.

He chuckled at my question. "Oh," he said, "I think my sailing days are over."

I was astonished.

Then he said, "But my son doesn't think so. He's found a spot for the boat in Holland and wants us to sail it down together" -- a distance of about 230 miles that might take the pair three or four days.

"I told him I'm not sure I can do it. I get tired now."

I gulped and spoke platitudes and voiced assurances, unsure myself whether such a journey would energize or deplete him.

Later, a mutual friend who is 88 told me he and my neighbor had talked about the son's proposal.

"I told him not to pass that up!" our friend said. "I told him it would be his last sail."

Letting go with grace

At 50, I'm not yet old enough to understand how a person concedes so gracefully to endings, to the prospect of never agains.

Oh sure, my husband and I vow we will never again rehab an old house. Never again will we paint a refrigerator. Never again will we hopscotch Europe, sleeping in a different bed every night for a month.

Never again will we do hard or foolish things.

But never again to sail? Never again to gallop a horse at sunset? Never again to host a joyful holiday meal? My 90-year-old mother-in-law, who loved to entertain, is giving away her fancy plates. She sees no more hosting in her future.

At what age or stage does it become easy to let go of life's delights?

Tell me. I want to begin rehearsing.