



Compared with the citizens of most other countries, Americans have always lived a nomadic existence. Nearly one in five of us move each year and, having done so, are likely to pick up and move again. As a result, compared to other peoples, Americans have become accustomed to pitching camp quickly and making friends easily. From our frontier and immigrant past we have learned to plunge into new community institutions when we move.¹²

Putnam goes on to explain that the mobility of Americans has actually declined since the 1950s, even if just a little. But we remain the world champions of mobility *and* therefore of familial disconnectedness.

A Pleasant Reality

So far this chapter has mostly been about unpleasant realities. We've written about depressing developments, from disabilities to disconnectedness to debts and death. We do hope you managed to bring a little levity into the discourse with *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. And, of course, our brother Steve's good humor helped. But, overall, our wake-up call so far has been more a dirge than dance. So we want to end this chapter with a happy story about three generations of Americans living together. We do recognize that living with kids, parents, and grandparents all in one house isn't exactly *Mary Poppins*. But the approach we advocate in this book not only can work, *it is working!*

Our story starts with a two-word question: "A toaster?" Now we all know that whenever a male is involved in gift giving, things don't always go as

Room for Thought 3.2. A History of Extended Family Interdependence

Each of our adult children has lived with us when they needed to, and this is an accepted custom in our family for years. In WWII my mother and I lived with my grandparents, aunt, and uncle while my dad was away at the war. I never "went home again" as an adult, but my mom let us know my family was welcome if necessary.

In middle age when the kids grew up, we have had one daughter bring along her ex-boyfriend's cat, another parked her dead old Dodge in the driveway, and our son moved his pregnant fiancée into our sewing room. That is to say, it's not a stress-free situation, but they are your family. When buying various homes it's been with an eye to providing shelter to family members who might need it. When my husband died, the kids all wanted me to come and move in with one of them.

Source: "pandrews" comment on Joyce Wadler, "Caught in the Safety Net," *New York Times*, May 13, 2009.



planned. So when Madeline opened her Christmas present from her son, Jim, his wife, Christine, and their daughter, Katie, the meaning didn't sink in right away. Madeline was wondering why the family was buying another toaster? All four of them had been living together now for three years, and their toaster always worked just fine. Madeline's wrinkled brow betrayed her befuddlement.

Christine noticed first and urged her to open "part two" of the package. Then everything became clear. Inside part two were the blueprints of Madeline's cottage, to be built on their property in the spring. They had all met with builders and looked at different kinds of apartments to get ideas in the weeks before. And Madeline would need a toaster in her new house across the yard since it would have a kitchen of its own. Now we'll let the family members tell the rest of the story in their own words:

Madeline: Jim and Christine moved here in July three years ago and I came out a month later. We had long, long conversations before I came out here. I was living in Florida alone and working. I was then seventy-two years old. They were coming to a strange place. Christine traveled a lot in her work, Jim some. In California they had had excellent day-care facilities for Katie.

Katie was starting first grade. So they discussed with me the cost of me coming out to live with them, hoping that it would be a win-win situation for everybody. So that Katie would have a constant in her life. And they were busy with work and it would be the same person there when she got home from school every day. It would relieve me from having to work—I had injured my back at that time. So it was a big decision for everybody. The key for me is that *I was invited*. At that time I felt like I was in a position where I could give back something and that I was still able to help. So I did live in the house with them for three years, until I moved into my own house.

Christine: That was kind of the plan all along. We tried to recover financially from the move from California first. We had talked about building a place for Madeline on the property. But we didn't want to commit to her, to get her hopes up—in case financially we couldn't. That's why we wanted that acreage so that we would have room to expand.

Jim: When we looked for the house, we looked for a one-story house that had a master suite on one side and bedrooms on the other. That way there would be enough room for it to be comfortable for people. You know, in case someone had to move in with us, like my mother or my dad or her parents, we wanted to provide a facility without having to go up and down stairs. Also, we knew at some point we were going to have to either provide more financial help for my mom or bring her to live with us. It worked for her to come live with us and help with Katie. We were already paying the house





payment and utilities, so it wasn't a big issue compared to getting extra help for us from someone else. It allows Christine and me both to work and keep our lifestyle.

Christine: We talked to a lot of people about the idea ahead of time. I think everybody thought we were nuts. Nobody supported us in our decision.

Madeline: I didn't either. Well, you can't really live together in a house, you know, especially three generations.

Christine: I want to say we do better in separate houses. But I think regardless of the input either Jim or I got, we still felt it would be a good win-win situation. I mean I don't know if that would work for every family. Not every daughter-in-law and mother-in-law could do it.

Sharon: Had you heard of others, your parents, participating in similar living arrangements?

Madeline: My grandmother lived with us—same house—the last couple of years before she died. Then later on my grandfather lived with us for a couple of years. They both lived a long time. My grandfather was ninety-three when he died. My grandmother was a very important part of my life.

Christine: We have ground rules. We have two. We talked about one—Madeline was a smoker and both Katie and I are both very allergic to smoke. So that was my biggest issue. She went outside to smoke. That was fine with her. That was a make-or-break deal for me. The other ground rule was that when Jim's dad visited we would have to do something different.

Jim: My mom and dad are divorced. So when my dad would come to visit, my mom would leave so we didn't have them both in the same household.

Madeline: I've been divorced for several years now. But, my former husband has a live-in companion. When I was living in the house with the kids, if he and his companion came for a visit, I left. I either went down to San Diego to visit my son or back to Florida to visit my relatives. He and I had discussed that before I moved in with the kids. That's how we worked things out.

Christine: It sounds like a piddling thing, but we did not want to cut Jim's dad out of our life and make this uncomfortable for anyone. I am somebody who tries to anticipate conflicts and get them resolved before things happen.





Madeline: It never was a conflict.

Sharon: Anything else? For example, do you have a call-first rule? If you want to come see the family, or you want to go see her, do you call her first? Or do you just go and knock on the door?

Christine: Oh, now that she is in her own house, I always call first—maybe 99.9 percent of the time. We never talked about it, it just sort of happened.

Jim: With all the moving, we did have to figure out what furniture to keep. When Mom came we had to figure where to put it and where to keep it.

Madeline: Their house is large enough that when I moved in with them, I had my bedroom, bath, and a sitting room. So you know I was able to bring with me the important pieces and be surrounded with my things. I'm not really big about being attached to things. But, certain things, yes. I had my old things and that worked out.

Jim: Also, she was allowed to pick out all the colors and all the carpet for the new cottage we built. The only things that we picked were the cabinets that would stay in the cottage.

Christine: We picked the permanent fixtures that will be there forever, because eventually that will probably be our office. And then anything else, such as paint, wallpaper, or flooring, Madeline picked all that out.

Madeline: It is eight hundred square feet. The building, the design of it, I like every single bit of it.

Christine: It has one bedroom, a living room, a kitchen, a bath, a lovely roof, and a very large closet off the bedroom which is almost big enough to fit a bed. It also has a covered patio. The cottage is absolutely lovely.

Sharon: How do you handle expenses such as taxes, utilities, phone, that kind of thing?

Jim: The things we pay for are the utilities, because they are tied into our account and the water is off our main meter. And we pay the mortgage, insurance, and property taxes.

Madeline: Yes, they do. I pay for my phone bill.





Sharon: What do you like about your housing situation?

Madeline: Well, I finally have my privacy. Before coming here, I had lived alone for so many years and gotten used to that. I don't think we ever had any issues while I lived with them. But when they had guests over, I was always concerned about how visible I should be. I didn't want to act like I was ignoring their guests, especially if it's people that I knew. But on the other hand, I didn't want to be in the middle of their conversations. So this way I think we each have been able to enjoy our guests more. I also enjoy the fact that they are so close. Katie can run back and forth across the yard, come over and visit me, and tell me what happened that day at school. The dog, we also share the dog.

Jim: The dog stays between both houses. So she can watch it too.

Madeline: The dog spends the weekends with me when they're away. I take care of the dog and the dog takes care of me. It's the best of both worlds. I mean they are right there if I need anything, should I need them.

In February I started walking into the walls, so I went to the doctor and he said I had an ear infection. Then they started testing me and figured out that it was a brain tumor. I had surgery last April and the tumor was benign. But I stayed with them for six weeks before moving back into my own house.

Sharon: Is there anything that you dislike about your current housing arrangement?

Christine: I don't think so. I think what we have now is perfect.

Jim: Actually it has worked out very well for all of us. It took a lot of planning and thinking about what we were going to do. At one point, we went out and looked for a small single-family home to buy for my mom. We looked everywhere and the closest thing we could find in our price range was probably six or seven miles away. We thought that's not convenient, if our daughter is coming home and neither one of us is here. We looked at apartments, but apartments were too expensive. We were trying to find a way to give her private space and keep her close enough. The cottage in back ended up being the most affordable.

The best solution for us was to build on the property, and it was much cheaper than any of the other options. A rented apartment would have just been throwing money away. Whereas, with the improvement to our property, the appraisal value is now double what we paid for the house three years ago. It made the most sense financially and she doesn't have to drive to come

