

# What Do We Owe Our Parents?

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No one denies that parents are obligated to take care of their children. At a minimum, it's a matter of law. But there is less clarity surrounding the question of whether children are obligated to care for their parents. One viral video from this holiday season touched on the subject, raising questions about what children owe to their parents in the modern era.

In the [video](#), the parents of recently signed Kansas City Royals pitcher Brady Singer are seen crying as they read a letter. In it, their son explains that he used part of his \$4 million signing bonus to pay off their debt as a Christmas gift. His mother can hardly speak through her tears as she reads the letter aloud.

"I just want to say thank you for everything you've done to help me reach my dreams," he wrote. "[T]here is absolutely no way I could have done all this by myself."

He goes on to explain that he has paid every penny of their debt and continues,

*Because you deserve the very best, I want you both to know how much I appreciate you and how none of this would be possible without you. Your giving hearts helped to shape my tiny dream into a reality. I love you both more than you can ever imagine and will never forget what you both have done.*

It would seem that at the root of familial breakdown is a lost sense of obligation: husbands and wives to each other, parents to their children, and children to their parents. A culture steeped in radical individualism has given people license to abandon their most fundamental obligations to their primary communities: their families.

Singer's letter strikes a stark contrast. Framed with the language of obligation, he acknowledges that his accomplishments were not that of an individual, but of a team of humans bound by the bonds of family. He makes his actions—while extreme in our day—seem natural.

To be sure, most people won't see a \$4 million windfall they can use to pay off their parent's debt. And receiving financial support is certainly not something older parents expect; [one study](#) found that less than 10% of parents expect any kind of financial support from their children and just 11% plan to live with their children. Our American model of parent-child filiation is decidedly one way: parents are expected to make tremendous financial sacrifices for their children (as the unending litany of "costs to raise a child today" articles make clear) and receive nothing in return, not even a roof over their heads.

And perhaps that is how it should be, as most adults with older parents have children of their own to care for. As Leon Kass [once put it so eloquently](#), "A hope-filled repayment forward of the debt we owe backward for our own life and rearing, our children represent also our share in the perpetual renewal of human possibility." In other words, the best way to "pay back" our parents for their sacrifices, a debt that truly cannot be repaid, is to make our best effort to raise children of our own. Parenthood can never truly be a quid pro quo.

Yet, as Pope Francis repeatedly points out when he admonishes us about a “throwaway culture,” the elderly are often viewed as discardable as the unborn. We wall them off in retirement homes, where they remain almost invisible to society until an ambulance comes to take them. Many of the 25 million older Americans living at or below the poverty line are even less lucky, living their final years alone and in destitution. And while some will rush to point out they should have saved more, many of these older adults no doubt poured what little they ever had into their children.

Even so, most children, it turns out, are surprisingly willing to help. Fully two-thirds of children say they plan to provide their parents with some financial assistance and the same percentage are willing to let their parents live with them when they retire.

And so, while a story like that of Brady Singer is hard for the average person to relate to, it points to something most people intuitively feel: we are obligated to the men and women who gave us life and a foothold in it. In today’s world of broken and unfulfilled obligations, it’s an instinct worthy of praise.

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