

THE CROWNING CURVE

Preparing Families for the Sacred Work of Aging

Faith, Neuroscience, and Practical Application

The Crowning Curve Includes the Dignity of a Coronation

Aging is the dignified and life-giving process of long-life. God designed the Crowning Curve as a season of satisfaction. Psalm 91:16 proclaims, “With long life will I satisfy thee.” Those in the Crowning Curve are crowned with dreaming dreams, of bridge building, encouraging, reflecting on life’s journey, and being and doing activities long awaited. Families select the lens through which to view their Crowning Curves. Focusing on the dignity of our beloved elders features the value and beauty of every moment rather than on what may or may not be diminished. The experiences of long-life have prepared families and their elders to put into practice the Biblical art of contentment. In much of our lives, we created things, projects, and dreams that we were required to carry. Our Crowning Curves allow us to no longer carry the heavy burdens we have generated, but to rest in He who said, “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.” Isaiah 46:4

We learn, in our Crowning Curves, to experience and practice contentment and satisfaction, even as families talk about the safety of continued driving, financial management, living arrangements, last wills and testaments, and advance directives. These conversations help the family transition from experiencing Crowning Curves as threats to embracing the new reality of regulated nervous systems. Together, you and your family will co-regulate and in so doing will design the Crowning Curve as life’s most meaningful and rewarding experience.

THE CONCEPT

Every family we serve eventually meets some version of the same moment: a parent who built a lifetime of competence — driving, managing money, running a household — is asked to hand pieces of that competence to someone else. The friction that follows is rarely stubbornness. It is a nervous system doing exactly what it was designed to do: defend a self that has equated independence with safety for seventy or eighty years. In these conversations, the elder is the one whose autonomy is shifting, and the family is the one learning how to respond.

This concept gives families — and the pastors and coaches walking with them — a biblically grounded, neuroscience-informed, practically useful framework for staying regulated, keeping the relationship healthy, and recognizing that adjustments may be necessary.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Scripture does not treat the later years as the diminishment of a well-lived life. Instead, the Crowning Curve is a season with its own joy, love, decisions, and grace — a season the rest of the family is invited and required to honor, bless, and embrace.

Aging as Crown, Not Cost

“Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.”

Proverbs 16:31 (ESV)

Gray hair is imagery of glory here, not diminishment — contingent on a righteous, well-lived life. Seen thus, it is filled with dignity. Our aging family member is still autonomous, the author of their own narrative, and still capable of “a righteous life.” Our beloved elder is not an uninvolved and mindless object others now manage.

A Command, Not a Suggestion

“You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.”

Leviticus 19:32 (ESV)

Honor has physical components — you stand up. What does “standing up” look like in your family while helping your elder navigate from independence to interdependence, to dependence? Here, the elder is being honored, and the family is implementing that honor.

Carried, Not Abandoned

“Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.”

Isaiah 46:4 (ESV)

Underpinning our elders’ sentences of “I don’t want to be a burden or lose my autonomy” can be deep-seated fear. Thoughts of abandonment, being an inconvenience, or being neglected and forgotten are realistic concerns in Western cultures. Yet God reveals His commitment and capacity to carry those in their gray-haired years. Families that show the same commitment and capacity toward their elders live out the character and nature of God Himself. In these moments, the elder may voice the fear, and the family is called to respond with steadiness and care.

The Jesus Model at the Cross

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”

John 19:26–27 (ESV)

Jesus is our Perfect Example. As His life ebbed away on the cross, He arranged care for His mother's future. Notice how Jesus applied the truth that we narrate to regulate. Our Lord used specific, relational, and spoken words: "Your son" and "Behold, your mother." He spoke directly to His beloved mother and in the hearing of everyone nearby. Those around the cross did not attempt to rob our Lord of His autonomy with private, back-room decisions. Jesus presented us with a pattern for making autonomy decisions. With clarity, name the situation, speak to those involved, and prioritize relationships. Here, Jesus makes the arrangement, and His mother is the one being cared for.

The Family's Obligation

"Let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. ... If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

1 Timothy 5:4, 8 (ESV)

The Apostle Paul highlights the role of faith in a family's care for their aging family members. Yes, providing for family elders is the duty of a person of faith. When you face questions about potential changes in your elder's personal autonomy, you may feel guilt rather than the confidence that you are walking in God's call to do what shows "godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents." In this light, knowing that decisions regarding our elders' autonomy are "good and acceptable before God" reframes decisions regarding driving, finances, and living arrangements as a sacred and significant responsibility. In these decisions, the family acts, and the elder is served.

NEUROSCIENCE FOUNDATION

Autonomy decisions are embodied within each participant's nervous system. Participants may experience various and perhaps shifting nervous system responses. In this context, autonomy decisions are best understood as conversations about the elder's and participant's whole spirit, soul, and body. In these conversations, the elder and the family each bring a nervous system response.

Loss of Control Is a Survival-Level Threat

Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin's 1976 Connecticut nursing home study found that perceived control and choice increase measurable well-being in elders. Within as soon as three weeks, those with perceived choice and control showed measurably increased happiness, alertness, and activity. The literature is well-supported across decades: perceived control and choice enhance elders' well-being measures. Accordingly, an elder's nervous-system state differs fundamentally when they perceive and experience a measure of voice and control over their time, location, and resources.

Reading the Resistance Through a Polyvagal Lens

Framed through Polyvagal Theory, neuroception detects every cue of lost safety. The nervous system detects that “giving up autonomy” places the future in a less safe space. Participants in the autonomy conversation may have heard and rehearsed worst-case scenarios before the conversations. Thus, the elder and the participants’ nervous systems may co-regulate into the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses. With healthful understanding and preparation, all participants may be able to co-regulate calm, peaceful, and thoughtful responses. Here, the elder is not the only one responding; the family is responding too.

Participants who understand and implement the “narrate to regulate” model will create space for everyone to share experiences of autonomy, control, independence, and freedom of personal choices. Discuss fears, phobias, concerns, worries, opportunities, improvements, and upsides before any decisions are made. Make all autonomy choices after extensive narration and nervous system regulation so every participant has time to co-regulate, reorient, and be understood.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: A FAMILY FRAMEWORK

The following old frame/new frame guide helps reframe autonomy conversations from nervous system threat responses into dialogue that flows from regulated states.

	OLD FRAME (Threat)	NEW FRAME (Regulation)
1	“We need to talk about taking away your right to drive.”	“Help me understand what meaning you experience from driving.”
2	A crisis driven one and done conversation.	Numerous small chats as part of a larger healthy aging conversation.
3	“Yes or No” decision.	Consider the many options within potential changes.
4	Participants begin in a dysregulated space and are worried about a crisis.	Participants address their own dysregulation and regulate themselves first, then begin the conversations.
5	Autonomy is an all-or-nothing perspective.	Seen as a continuum, autonomy remains wherever and whenever safety is maintained.

The Narrate to Regulate Model of Autonomy Conversations

- Begin long before there is a crisis.
- Maintain all autonomous choices within the overall autonomy decisions. Keep an “autonomy continuum” perspective. Use this to help the elder see choices as part of the process, and the family as part of the support.
- Address autonomy conversations only when all participants are regulated, peaceful, mindful, and non-activated.

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- Plan for numerous, repeated conversations. Crowning Curve decisions deserve plenty of time. This repeated pace helps the family stay steady as the decisions unfold.
- Select all words with great care. The narrate-to-regulate model of autonomy decisions prioritizes language of honor and respect. For example, “They will assist you,” not “There will be someone to take care of you.” “In this decision, we will honor you and your wishes.” Not, “In this decision, someone will manage you and your care.” Use language that makes clear who is being honored and who is doing the honoring.
- Hold strongly to Jesus’ Model: Specific, relational, and spoken words. Speak to the elder, the family, and the others involved with equal clarity.
- REMEMBER!!! This is the Crowning Curve, not the discarding curve.