

“You can’t change the direction of the wind, but you can adjust your sails.” These words of wisdom have become my mantra since the horrific September evening when Hurricane Ian ravaged the west coast of Florida, blowing away the house I grew up in and leaving my eighty-seven-year-old mother homeless. In the aftermath, we have had to deal with the loss of treasured possessions and emotional trauma, but the most difficult hurdle to deal with was the necessity of introducing my mother to 21<sup>st</sup> century technology.

The afternoon before Ian hit, I was closely watching the path of the hurricane on TV. My vigil was interrupted when Mom called me from her beige pushbutton phone that hung on the kitchen wall. She assured me that she was ready for the storm. Shutters were locked, food and water were stockpiled, and my daughter, her husband, and baby were there for the night. Mom had seen over forty years of Florida weather, and she was calmly prepared to sit it out. The brunt of the storm was projected to pass to the north.

Several hours later, my daughter called to let me know they had lost power and were shutting down their cell phones to conserve batteries. Hours passed, and then my daughter called again, this time with a trembling voice. She said the roof had blown off, ceilings were collapsing, and water was pouring in through the gaping holes. With 170 mile per hour winds, they couldn’t open the doors to get out of the house. She hung up, and I sat a thousand miles away in Iowa, scared and helpless. The phone rang again. They had climbed through a window and into the car. My son-in-law, an army veteran who served in Afghanistan, drove around downed power lines, blowing debris, and over flooded sidewalks to get his family safely at his brother’s house a few miles down the road.

Although they were physically unharmed, shock took hold of my mother. She realized she had left her heart behind in the house, my father’s ashes. When the eye of the hurricane slowed the winds, my son-in-law went back to retrieve my dad’s urn, along with his handmade guitar. It was later the next day before they could return and assess the damage. More than fifty percent of the house was destroyed. My mother’s eighty-eight-year-old neighbor and lifelong friend had minimal damage to her home and offered Mom a temporary place to stay. We had no idea how difficult the journey to stability would become.

My sister and I jumped into the red tape and technological tangle of insurance, FEMA claims, adjusters, attorneys, contractors, and zoning laws. To this point in her life, mom’s connection to the world was through her landline telephone and the postal service. Before his passing, my father was the one who “took care of business.” Now, Mom was being told she had to sign up for financial aid online, fill out forms on a computer, set up accounts, make up Usernames and passwords, receive confirmation texts for security, have a cell number and email address, and divulge person information to faceless administrators. The downed powerlines and lack of internet made the task impossible for anyone who didn’t have friends or family outside of the disaster area, let alone my mother, who didn’t even own a cell phone.

This experience opened my eyes to how difficult it is for seniors to navigate in today's tech-dependent society, and it is especially hard for those who live alone. They must buy hardware, learn how to use it, overcome their fears, and deal with possible physical issues that come with age. My mother is fortunate in that she has daughters and grandchildren who can guide her through the process of buying the right computer, installing the programs she will need, and setting up an email account. Unfortunately, as the adage says, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink. My mom flatly refuses to learn how to use her new "toys."

Studies have shown that the generation of current retirement age is most resistant to change. They are intimidated by technologies they don't understand, become overwhelmed by the learning process, and are often afraid of breaking the newfangled gadgets. There is a general distrust of computers; an idea fueled by many of our current television shows and movies. They fear that using internet devices will open them up to constant surveillance by hackers trying to steal identities and bank accounts. Hearing new terms such as viruses and Phishing increases their anxiety. Not that these aren't valid concerns, but safety precautions can help keep Granny from becoming another victim.

Surveys suggest that at least half of the over sixty-five population is using some type of technology, mainly cell phones. However, use may be hampered by physical disabilities that come with aging. As we age, our brains shrink and become slower in processing. This doesn't mean we can't learn, but it may take longer. Memory can also be affected, so detailed instructions and passwords may need to be written down. Older eyes may have trouble with monitor brightness, clarity, color, and font. Operating a touch screen or clicking a mouse can be difficult if hands shake or are unsteady. My mother is struggling with this on her new cell phone. Answering a call with a swipe often results in her changing the screen, leaving her unable to navigate back to the home page. Also, she holds down too long on virtual buttons, resulting in multiple results. Add to this the need to keep the phone charged; it's no wonder she is frustrated!

Technology is here to stay, and in the attempt to make our lives easier, the technology itself is becoming more advanced. In the case of our seniors, it should be the responsibility of the younger generation, family, and friends to help them sail through these winds of change. Many articles have been written addressing the methods of introducing seniors to the world of computers, and they all give the same general advice: Start slow, talk about safety and security concerns, write everything down, avoid technical jargon, and have patience. Start out teaching them games or something they would enjoy. I find that texting pictures of my grandson to my mother is a fantastic way of making her comfortable with cell phone use.

In conclusion, the winds of Hurricane Ian brought a monumental change into my mother's life. There is nothing good one can say about losing a house, all their possessions, and security. But if we can find the silver lining, Mom is keeping her mind sharp by learning new technologies and communicating more with her family through social media, letting her know she is not alone.