"Readers of Nancy Brummett's newest book, *Take My Hand Again*, will find themselves in the pages of real-life stories about families and their journeys through aging. They will be comforted in discovering that they are not alone in their mixed-up feelings. Nancy has written a practical yet hope-filled book that is sure to help both younger and older generations reexamine their roles with love and grace as together they navigate through the uncertainties of later years."

—Missy Buchanan, speaker and author of *Voices of Aging: Adult Children and Aging Parents Talk with God*

"Nancy Parker Brummett takes readers by the hand to walk with them through key issues involved in caring for aging parents, using her Christian faith to narrate the meanings of the journey. Her warm, tender approach is grounded in both personal experience and careful research. Very human stories richly illustrate aging dilemmas, resilience, loss, gains, poignant moments, grace, and a sense of purpose. Information and resources offer guidance for those feeling alone and lost in the process as well as those preparing for the future. The book could be a personal guide or a group study experience for midlife adults, all with a focus on maximizing the respect and dignity of older adults while comforting those providing care."

—Sara Honn Qualls, clinical geropsychologist and author of *Caregiver Family Therapy*

"This is the most comprehensive book on aging and caregiving I've ever seen. It is an excellent resource for anyone facing either one or both of these issues. Great stories, great ideas, great solutions!"

—Dr. Helen B. McIntosh, counselor and author of *Messages to Myself: Overcoming a Distorted Self-Image*

"A thoughtful and loving guide to what can be an emotionally fraught period of time when adult children take on the role of caregiver to their aging parents. Easy to read and full of examples and stories of

how families can approach this time. We know that they will face significant life changes such as managing chronic illness or moves to assisted-living facilities. I hope that readers of this book are filled not only with information but also with hope as they lead their parents into the future."

—Beth Hall Roalstad, MSW, executive director of Innovations in Aging Collaborative

"Nancy's words flow from deep devotion to the aging community and those who care for them. *Take My Hand Again* is replete with endearing anecdotes of caring for precious parents and is filled, from cover to cover, with detailed and practical paths to accomplish that care. I was deeply moved throughout—tears, laughter, and resolve jockeyed for equal attention. This invaluable book will certainly find its way into the hands of my children, so that they won't miss a beat in my end-of-life care!"

—Alice Scott-Ferguson, speaker, writer, and author of *Mothers Can't Be Everywhere But God Is*, and *Reconcilable Differences* coauthored with Nancy Parker Brummett

"I love this encouraging and helpful book, *Take My Hand Again*. As a young couple my wife and I took in her mother to live with us. I wish we'd had a copy of this book then."

—Pastor Ron Ritchie, author of *Free at Last!*

"This book reminds us that many times along our life-walk, the path becomes obscure. We need someone to help show us the way and that someone is God. I am reminded of Proverbs 16:3—'Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.' This book will certainly help adult children who now find themselves in a role reversal situation."

—Ken & Sylvia Ringling, owners of Interim HealthCare, Colorado Springs, Colorado

TAKE MY HAND AGAIN

Also by Nancy Parker Brummett

The Hope of Glory
It Takes a Home
The Journey of Elisa
Reconcilable Differences
Simply the Savior

TAKE MY HAND AGAIN

A FAITH-BASED GUIDE FOR HELPING AGING PARENTS

NANCY PARKER BRUMMETT

Kregel Publications

Take My Hand Again: A Faith-Based Guide for Helping Aging Parents

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To all who pray, hope, and care for the aging parents they love

Contents

Acknowledgments

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Finally and always, to God be the glory! It is He who urges, inspires, and ultimately creates anything that is created, including this book.

Introduction

The ringing phone jars you awake in the middle of the night. You manage to get it to your ear and the voice on the other end tells you your mother fell and is being taken to the emergency room. Or you leave a visit with your dad, and as soon as you get in the car, you put your head down and just let the tears flow. You know you can't ignore the signs any longer. He's not doing well in his present living situation. His basic safety is at risk.

Regardless of how the realization dawns on us that our elderly parents need us to intervene in their care, we are seldom ready. Most of us with aging parents prefer the comfort of denial—that they will go on as they are indefinitely. Their lives will stay the same and so will ours. They'll continue to make their own decisions about housing, doctors, medications, and diet, and we'll continue to meet the demands of our busy lives with only the occasional visit and phone call to stay in touch.

But as those who have traveled down this road know full well, change is inevitable. Ready or not, circumstances shift, and so do the familiar family roles developed over a lifetime. Overnight, you realize that your role is now more that of parent than son or daughter, and the elder you love—the one you've depended on for guidance and help all your life—is now turning to you for support.

The many questions this transition entails can keep you awake at

night. How much involvement is necessary or wanted? How will the elders you love respond to your well-intentioned efforts to help? And while roles change, isn't it disrespectful to say that we are parenting our parents? After all, they will always be a generation ahead of us. And we will always be their kids.

Beginning the journey of caring for your aging parent can feel like being dropped off in a foreign country where you don't know the language and don't even have a reliable map or GPS. Fortunately, others have traveled this road ahead of you and are willing to share what they've learned to make your journey go more smoothly.

Take My Hand Again is a starting place for those headed down this long, winding path of caregiving. If you are reading this book, chances are you've already gotten the wake-up call that life as you know it is about to change. Or you are wise enough to know that being in denial about your parent's aging won't help either of you navigate this next stage of life together. You want to be prepared for what's to come: to anticipate the signs that change is necessary and to know the questions to ask and the potholes to avoid.

Those who discover they must now intervene and care for an elder they love often desperately wish they had a wise and experienced friend—someone who has traversed this path ahead of them and can direct the journey. It's my prayer that by sharing useful, encouraging information mixed with hope, humor, and faith, *Take My Hand Again* will be that trusted companion for you.

God placed us in families for a reason. While your aging parent's situation and your role in your family may be changing dramatically, none of these changes takes God by surprise. Put your hand firmly in His. Be open to advice from others. Seek out helpful resources such as this, and soon the fog will dissipate to reveal the path ahead. You'll begin to know what to do and how to help, and you'll reach out for your parent's hand with love and confidence. You can do this.

Chapter 1

CHANGING ROLES

Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

—Exodus 20:12

On one of my visits to Tennessee from Colorado to visit my mother at her assisted living community the two of us started down the hall toward the dining room for dinner. Holding on to the railing that ran along one side of the wall with her right hand, my little five-foot mom reached her left hand out to grab hold of mine. "Somehow I always feel better when you're here to hold my hand," she said, as down the hall we went.

I knew that feeling well. When I was a little girl and Mom took me downtown to shop for a new Easter dress or back-to-school shoes, I felt better when she held my hand as we crossed the busy street. Going up those big, tall steps into the school where I would start kindergarten, I couldn't have made it without her hand to steady me. All my life

I'd found security in reaching out for her and knowing she was there for me. Now she was saying, "Take my hand again," only it was my mom needing the reassurance, and I was the one being asked to find the courage and strength to provide it.

It's not like she was alone during the months between my visits. My two sisters were local and visited her frequently, and she was surrounded by other caregivers and friends in her assisted living community. But Mom liked knowing all three of her "chicks" were home to roost, and so holding my hand gave her a special sense of security.

To say I was pleased to take her hand is an understatement. But most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, are reluctant to accept the role transition such a simple gesture represents. We see signs of aging in our parents that startle or alarm us, but we dismiss them as momentary lapses or anomalies. After all, if we accept that we now must be the one to make the decisions and carry the load, then we are relinquishing the security we've always found in relying on our parents to do that.

Furthermore, how *do* we honor our fathers and mothers in this season of their lives? Do we support their wishes and desire for independence, or do we express our heartfelt concerns and insist on changes to protect their welfare? If we choose the latter, how strange that the role of caregiver and protector now becomes ours to play.

In her book *Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Aging Parents*, Claire Berman writes about an encounter she had with a young man, an international lawyer, at a dinner party. It clearly illustrates how difficult and confusing such a change in roles can be. "The change in my mother has been very much on my mind of late," the young man said, "because the situation at my firm is no longer as stable as I'd like it to be, and I've been wondering whether to make a move. Many's the time I find myself instinctively reaching for the phone, wanting to talk to my mother about this, but then I stop myself because I realize that Mother's no longer able to support me in this way. I have found myself of late feeling a mixture of love and irritation toward my

mother. She's eighty-four now, losing her grip on reality, and I have to be there for her instead of the other way around. The fact is, I want the mother I always had."[1]

This loss of the parent we always had is a long process of grief and acceptance. Where's the mom with the insightful relationship advice? Who's going to fix the leak under the sink when Dad can't? We all tend to long for the parent we are already losing, and our reluctance to accept the role transition has nothing to do with our chronological age. Some of my friends lost their mothers at a young age and were involved in their care when they were only in their twenties or thirties. A special friend of my mom's was in his eighties when his mother passed away in a nursing home, but I don't think he found it any easier to say good-bye when the time came. None of them took the caregiving role lightly nor assumed it without some denial.

Regardless of how old we are when the roles change, we just wish things could stay the way they were a bit longer. We're scared. Our aging parent is scared. We don't know if we are up to the challenge. But we're sure of one thing: in the midst of so much uncertainty, holding hands is a good idea.

Generations Together

Not so long ago in America, and in some rural areas yet today, the question of who would care for Grandma or Grandpa as they aged was predetermined. The generations shared one home, and so naturally the elder person would age in place with a loving family to care for him or her.

Until she passed away when I was sixteen, my Granny Parker lived with us. Actually, my mother and father moved into her big farmhouse in Tennessee to help her take care of the place after my grandfather passed away at a young age, so it's more accurate to say we lived with her.

I don't think my parents intended to stay for long, but they did, and as our family began to grow, we gradually took over more and more of

the house. It was Granny's choice to turn most of the house over to us, but she still lived with us. Of course, the benefit of this arrangement for my sisters and me was that she was always present in our lives.

My sisters and I were never uncomfortable in the company of older people because we lived with Granny. We never had a babysitter. If my parents went out, we just stayed home with Granny. On one of those evenings, Granny played the piano and coached me through the singing of two hymns so I could try out for the school chorus. Then she made me promise not to tell anyone she could still play the piano, because she didn't want to be drafted to play for church or family events! I'm in my midsixties now, and I still think of her whenever I sing "Fairest Lord Jesus" or "This Is My Father's World."

I learned a lot about aging just hanging out with Granny playing games, reading stories, or even plucking the hair that grew out of her chin for her. Daily I observed the way my mom stepped in to drive Granny to see her friends or to the doctor. I never knew that taking care of her mother-in-law was such a sacrifice on my mom's part—because she never made it seem like one. It was simply her role to fulfill.

My times alone with Granny were intimate and authentic, and many are forever etched in my memory. A special one comes to mind as if it were yesterday. My grandmother is sitting on our screened-in back porch with a big silver bowl in her lap and a big brown bag of what we call "string beans" in Tennessee on the picnic table beside her. As I watch her snap, snap, snap, I'm lulled by the rhythm of her pace and mesmerized by the sight of her gnarled old fingers as she works.

The method Granny used was second nature to her and is now second nature to me. She snapped off each end of the bean, peeled down the string, and then gave the bean two more quick snaps in rapid succession. Snap . . . snap, zip . . . snap, snap. That's the string bean symphony.

I wondered if the bowl fit perfectly in her lap because it was made

to do so, or if her lap had just molded to the shape of the bowl over the years. Always the same bowl. Always the same kind of beans.

It was on these hot summer afternoons, helping Granny snap, that I had my best talks with her. I would occasionally ask a question, knowing it could be quite a few more snaps before I got an answer. The questions were both trivial and monumental, but the answers always seemed profound.

My grandmother died two days after suffering a stroke on her ninetieth birthday. Through the years, each time I sit down with a bag of beans to snap, I feel tremendously comforted and reassured. Snapping beans gives me a feeling of connectedness that transcends time and location. My grandmother snapped beans. My mother snapped beans and threw just enough pork salt into the water when she cooked them to give them a wonderful flavor. I snap beans, too, and try to add enough spice to add the flavor without the fat—an impossible goal.

Years ago when my then two-year-old granddaughter was visiting, I encouraged her to snap string beans with me. After snapping off each end, I handed the bean to her and asked her to break it into little pieces, never dreaming she'd be able to do so without help. Her chubby little hands tightened down on the bean and she twisted it until it snapped. "Ouch!" she said, as if the snapping noise indicated the bean had been hurt. I handed her another bean. "Ouch . . . ouch!" she exclaimed as she gave it two perfect snaps.

The tears in my eyes as I watched her caught me by surprise. Now a new generation was snapping beans. Ninety-year-old, gnarled fingers . . . two-year-old pink, chubby ones . . . everything was connected. The strings that hold us together can be as simple and strong and purposeful as those on the beans. With a lot of "ouch" when they break.

The connections in family circles can still be this strong, but living together certainly makes the bonding occur more naturally. What happened to this comfortable blend of generations? When did it become the norm for grandparents to live alone or in a care center,

often miles and miles away from their closest relatives? A look back may help us understand.

Looking Back

Although we tend to think that individuals are able to live longer now than ever before, that's not necessarily true. The average lifespan was indeed much shorter hundreds of years ago, but that is because many diseases back then had no immunizations or cures. Those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who managed to avoid disease were as likely to live to a ripe old age as someone alive today. Now, however, so many more people are surviving that the cultural impacts are huge as we determine how to care for a much larger aging population.

The statistics are daunting. There are approximately 79 million Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) in the United States, if you include legal immigrants.[2] The first of the boomers turned sixty-five in 2011. By 2030 there will be about 72.1 million persons age sixty-five and older in the United States, more than twice the number in 2000. This means that for the first time in history, seniors will outnumber children and youth.[3]

Obviously, these statistics and others are sounding an alarm to all the providers and caregivers whom seniors will look to for help to live out their days in relatively good health and comfort. They also forewarn how our elderly parents, and we, may live out the last years of life. Many in the field say we are far from ready to meet the needs of the approaching "senior tsunami." In Colorado Springs, a nonprofit collaborative titled Innovations in Aging is working to address what are seen as key factors in getting ready for the aging wave: public transportation, isolation, health care, and low-income housing.

"We believe that creating neighborhood-based resources called iHubs (intergenerational hubs) to localize information and services to support seniors in their community will reduce transportation barriers and will increase health and safety for residents," said Beth Roalstad, executive director.[4] Beth believes that communities "stepping up" are

going to be crucial in the years to come—especially to fill in the gap for elders without family caregivers. Unfortunately, most communities have yet to address this growing need.

Historically, populations have approached aging with a combination of preparation and denial, much as we do today. During the Puritan era, roughly 1620–1700, there seemed to be a reverence for the elder saints of the church. Because only 2 percent of the Puritan society lived to the age of seventy, those who did were thought of as God's special people.

Throughout the early history of our country, the primary care for aging citizens remained with the family. Although we have many more institutions to assist us in this generation, those of you reading this book would no doubt agree that the primary responsibility still resides with the family, even if that looks different than it did years ago.

The first institutional homes for older people followed our nation's wars and were primarily established to care for veterans. After the Revolutionary War, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a personal friend of John and Abigail Adams, took up the cause. He also was the first to identify the onslaught of dementia in older adults.

After the Civil War, the industrial era in the United States developed so quickly that older people began to be left behind. Job seekers moved to industrial centers in hordes, and by 1920, more people lived in the city than in the country. In the 1920s and 1930s, social activism for the aging began in force, especially since older citizens suffered most from the Great Depression. It was into this social milieu that Frances Perkins, the first woman to be appointed to the US cabinet and serve as secretary of labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt, introduced the legislation that became the Social Security Act of 1935. A portion of that legislation was Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance. At the time of the act's adoption, the average life expectancy for men in the United States was fifty-eight to sixty years, and for women, sixty-two to sixty-four years. Benefits began at age sixty-five.

The ramifications of Social Security and the benefits established over the years since its inception are subjects for other discussions. Suffice it to say that you will learn more than you ever wanted to know about this program as you care for your aging family members. In addition, you will by necessity become educated about Medicare, created under Title XVIII of the Social Security Act and signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Medicare was created to provide health insurance to people age sixty-five and older, regardless of income or medical history. Medicaid, added the same year under Title XIX of the Social Security Act, is the program that provides health insurance for individuals and families with low income and insufficient resources, including the elderly

All these programs deserve further study, and if you are in the midst of sorting out options and benefits for your aging parent, it's best to locate a professional to help you with the ins and outs. (See the recommended resources at the end of this book.) During the years my husband and I cared for my mom and his, I frequently thought of the elderly woman who I was sure existed in this country—the one without younger family members to make the phone calls, fill out the required forms, and navigate the choices these well-intentioned government programs provide. Such tasks can be beyond overwhelming for the average adult. They are nearly impossible for anyone with any level of dementia or confusion.

We've come a long way in terms of what we provide for our aging citizens in this country, and yet so much remains unchanged. The very old still need help getting to the bathroom. They still need help dressing for the day, and many need protection from a tendency to wander away unsupervised. Most need help making sound financial decisions or even balancing a checkbook. As much as some things change, so much doesn't. How we respond is the question. And the answers can vary from person to person, family to family. The answers you are looking for are the ones you hope and pray will be the right answers for your loved one, but it's so hard to be sure.

Moving Forward

While it's good to have the historical perspective, you are more concerned with how to get through this week without making the wrong decisions or frustrating the elderly person you love. Hopefully it's comforting to remember you aren't the first adult child to experience the angst that the change in roles creates. Regardless of how independently you have chosen to operate in your life and career till now, this is the time for collaboration, support, and the sharing of experiences and wisdom.

It's also a time for empathy, because just as you've never been in this position before, neither has your elder parent. Here's what author Jane Gross said about this difficult transition in her poignant, insightful book, *A Bittersweet Season: Caring for Our Aging Parents—and Ourselves*: "While it may be impossible to escape the complicated feelings engendered by being thrust into a quasi-parental role toward one's parent, you can try to leaven those thoughts by considering how *they* feel about the same role reversal. The work, and ultimately the grief, is ours, but the accretion of losses is theirs. They are giving up their independence, their physical or mental capacities, their pride, their role as head of the family, their spouses and their friends."[5]

How helpful it is for us to think of the weight of those losses on days when we yearn for a schedule of our own again, time to think, or simply time to be. Gross goes on to say, "On the days when I wished I could run away from my responsibilities, I'd practice this mind game: *If I can't bear one more day as my mother's mother, imagine how she feels.*"[6]

The losses elders suffer easily make themselves known. I was finishing up a devotional hour at an assisted living community where I volunteer when I noticed that one of the residents who had been in the class seemed a bit disoriented.

"May I help you, Sara?" I asked, to which she replied, "Well, I have a problem. I want to go home but I don't have a car. I need to call my daughter and tell her to come get me, but I don't have her number." I should have known better, having been the daughter and

daughter-in-law of assisted living residents myself, but instead I suggested that she go to the office to get the number.

Very shortly she was back in the activities room with the number in hand. I offered to dial for her, handed her the phone, and heard her say, "You need to come take me home right now!" I couldn't help but overhear her daughter saying, "Mom, you are home. You live there now, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," Sara responded dejectedly. I asked her if I could speak to her daughter and she handed me the phone. I introduced myself, reassured her as best I could, and said I would see Sara safely to her room. The two of us, Sara with her cane, started the long, slow walk down one hall, then another. As we neared the room I knew was hers, I asked, "Does this look familiar, Sara?" She stopped, turned to look at me with tears in her eyes, and said, "Yes. But I don't like it."

Always my favorite resident to visit until she passed away, and the subject of many more joyful stories, Sara gradually adjusted to her losses and the transition that gave her daughter the role of decision-maker regarding her welfare. But it was an agonizing period of adjustment for both of them.

Accepting the change in roles must always precede the ability to move forward in a way that is both caring and productive for all involved. Otherwise, we are simply stuck with our roles frozen in time. The signs that we have to step in, that the roles must indeed shift, are as individual as the older adults for whom we collectively care.

Pam's mother lived in Canada while Pam was miles away in the United States. She first began to suspect a change was necessary when a visit revealed that her mom, then in her nineties, was having difficulty remembering appointments and assimilating important information. "Mom was always a voracious and informed reader," Pam said, "so I was taken aback when on one visit books and other items were in the same place that I had left them two months before. She always made detailed notes of everything, but now the notes were so

touchingly sad and repetitive, and showed such an internal struggle as she tried unsuccessfully to make everything seem stable."

Gail was thrust into a caregiving role with both her mom and her dad in a neighboring state, but the beginnings of the transition in roles looked different with each parent. "My mother's dementia became obvious when I couldn't get a clear answer regarding the results of her doctor appointments or information about her prescriptions," Gail said. "Also, my normally chatty mother was keeping our phone conversations very short, asking only general questions about the kids, work, and the weather. She was afraid that if she talked more her dementia would be obvious to me—and to her, so she stayed away from specifics."

While Gail's mom tried to cover up her dementia, her dad was open about his encroaching Alzheimer's. "When my father turned eighty, he honestly told me that he thought he had the beginnings of Alzheimer's. He said he would forget why he was in a room, what he was going to do next, or where he placed something," Gail remembered. "While it was a surprise to me that Dad was admitting it, he wasn't overly concerned; he reminded me that after all, he was eighty!"

Two very different ways of getting the news. But they were equally concerning to an out-of-state, married daughter with three children and a high-powered job. No matter how you come to realize that your life is about to change dramatically, it can be an adjustment at first. So we remember that it's even harder for our elder parent, and we move forward one day at a time.

A poignant essay by Virginia Wells appeared in an issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* and speaks volumes about the role transition with her mom. She begins with a memory of herself as a little girl watching her mother get ready to go out for the evening: "My mother stands at the bathroom mirror putting on makeup. She has delicate hands with slim fingers and nails painted Revlon Fire & Ice red. She smoothes on foundation, then rouge and a little eye color. Finally, she takes lipstick, Fire & Ice too, carefully outlines her lips, then presses them

together. She pulls me close and kisses me hard on the mouth. She's a sweet mixture of soap and cologne. Together, we look at our reflection. Now I am wearing lipstick too."

Many years later the reflection is quite different. "My mother has a fractured ankle and she has stayed with me for several weeks," she writes. "She can barely use a walker, but she tries, her shoulders stooped over as she inches her way across the room. She's quiet; she has nothing to say. . . . One night I sit her in front of the mirror and find my own Fire & Ice polish. I hold her thin fingers in mine and spread the color evenly over her nails. My mother watches as her pale hands come alive. For a moment I realize that she is still in there somewhere, and I know I will stay close by, waiting till she reappears."[7]

Maybe this story touches my heart so deeply because I can still see my own mother's gorgeous nails adorned with Revlon's Windsor Rose (since discontinued). I wore a similar shade before she died but haven't been able to use it since. It's enough that my hands look just like hers even without the polish. One of many ways I am so much like my mother, and so, never truly without her.

Accepting the Call

In the well-loved Bible study *Experiencing God*, authors Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King remind readers that answering God's call on their lives will always require making major adjustments. "Every time God spoke to people in the Scripture about something He wanted to do through them, major adjustments were necessary," they write. "They had to adjust their lives to God. Once the adjustments were made, God accomplished His purposes through those He called."[8] Once you sense the call to help your aging parent, those words will be true of you as well. This may be one of the most significant calls you will ever receive. And the sacrifices you and your family have to make in order for you to answer the call will soon be evident.

The call might not come as clearly as the one you get in the middle of the night alerting you to a crisis in an elderly person's life. It may be

a gentle nudging of the Holy Spirit that the responsibility for a loved one's care is being placed on your shoulders. Part of accepting the call is recognizing its uniqueness. Your siblings may be hearing that they are to serve their parents in a much different way than you are, or it may seem as if they are escaping responsibility altogether. This doesn't change your call, and the fact that you're reading this book is one indication that the call may be yours.

Celebrity Robin Roberts was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder following breast cancer treatment that required her to go into the hospital for a bone marrow transplant. She assumed that her closest sibling, Dorothy, would be the match, but it turned out to be her sister Sally-Ann. As Robin and Sally-Ann began the process of preparing for the transplant, their mother, Lucimarian, was close to death in her home in Pass Christian, Mississippi. It was Dorothy who was able to be with their mother. She was the one who received the call at that time.

Yet certainly celebrities are often called into duty as caregivers. Singer Amy Grant, interviewed on the talk show hosted by Katie Couric, shared tips she learned from taking care of her parents. She recommends starting the conversation about care early, saying, "Let us know what you want. You trained us for this; you did your job well." Other tips included taking healthy meals by to combat poor nutrition as well as playing games requiring physical movement. "There's a lot of joy in it," she says of caring for elders. "You are gonna cry, but you're gonna laugh."[9]

Likewise, former *Good Morning America* anchor Joan Lunden became actively involved with caring for her mom. Deciding where her mother should live was "one of the more emotionally trying experiences I have faced," Lunden said. She is now a spokesperson for a service that helps families make these decisions, A Place for Mom (www.aplaceformom.com).

When I asked my friend Gail, who cared for both her aging parents from a distance, if she had any advice to give others embarking on a

similar journey, she said, "It gets easier once you tell yourself 'this is hard, but I'm going to have to settle in and go through it.' It's only for a season. If you embrace it, with all the ups and downs, you will feel a richness and deeper sense of purpose. You will know that in your own way you are completing the circle of life." My friend Kathy put the same advice a slightly different way: "Love much. Die to your personal comfort for a season—it's worth it. Honor your father and mother."

There are few times in life when we can be absolutely sure our heavenly Father is looking down on us with delight and approval. All of them seem to involve self-sacrifice and reaching out to others. If you are hearing the call to care for an aging loved one, embrace it and adjust your life accordingly. And by the way, you don't have to be a blood relative to hear the call. My friend Shar did everything a loving daughter would have done for her older friend Jeanne, right up to holding Jeanne's hand when she died. She heard the call to meet the needs of a dear woman who had no one else to turn to, and she responded.

It won't be easy to respond to the call, and you may not always feel appreciated, but the rewards for you and your loved one will be rich indeed. In fact, they will be eternal.