

If I Walked In Her Shoes  
Reflections in Caregiving

A Novel By  
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## PROLOGUE

### Care Giving

The *National Family Caregiver Association* estimates that there are currently over *50 million* family caregivers in the United States. Of those, 20 million are part of what is referred to as the *Sandwich Generation*. This means that they are the “meat in the sandwich,” providing care for both their children and their parents or grandparents. As the Baby Boomer Generation grows older the number of caregivers will increase in the years to come.

This Sandwich Generation faces a number of special challenges in caregiving, especially when an aging loved one moves into the family home. Caregivers are constantly being pulled from both ends of the generational spectrum—below and above:

- ***From below:*** Their own children—whether toddlers, teens, or young adults—require a lot of time and attention from their parents as they grow and face new trials and opportunities.

- ***From above:*** Their aging parents require time and attention as well.

Those sandwiched in the middle can easily become overwhelmed trying to meet the physical, psycho-social, and emotional needs of both their children and their aging loved ones.

Ephesians 6:2-3 (NIV) exhorts us: “Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

That is quite a promise.

We all want to enjoy long life on the earth. What happens, however, when the commitment to honoring our parents leads us to feel guilty or make poor decisions based on self-reproach or lack of information and resources? Or what if we are in the bind between doing what’s best for our aging parents or our young children?

Caregivers can readily become taskmasters who work through their *To-Do* lists for their children and parents. The Bible is very clear about the promise, but what we need to be clear about is exactly what *honoring* truly means. Many take this as a mandate always to move the aging parent into their home.

In some cases this *will be* how we honor them. But in other cases we may better honor our parents by securing an Independent or Assisted Living community to enable and empower them to remain as independent as they possibly can and afford them opportunities for social interaction with a cohort of others who are experiencing the same types of issues and losses in their lives.

Moving an aging loved one into our home is not always a bad idea. If our parents need care we are called to assist them. We are expected to help. Nevertheless, there are times when

these decisions are made in haste or without a full knowledge of how these arrangements will affect our relationship with that loved one.

The reality is that caring for an elderly parent can be both challenging and rewarding. It can be the greatest blessing and the most painful ordeal that a person may ever experience. The good news is that there are more options and resources available today to help us care for older adults—to help us truly honor our parents—than at any time in history.

Providing care for our aging parents entails:

- **Multitasking:** coordinating doctor appointments, customizing areas of our home to accommodate any physical disabilities or other special needs, physically caring for them with such tasks as bathing and dressing, which can lead to uncomfortable situations, etc.
- **Changes in family dynamics:** Changes in family dynamics are inevitable when Sandwich Generation parents are simultaneously providing care for their own children and their own parents and when grandchildren's lives change to accommodate or help care for a grandparent. Competing demands for such limited resources as time and energy—and possibly even material things—can create tension and conflict.

Having acknowledged all that, there is something—*someone*—else we need to consider. It is the other side of the story; a different perspective—the perspective of the aging loved one.

As caregivers we must always remember that older adults do not wake up one day and say, “Boy, am I getting old! I think I will go live with my children and change the dynamics of our relationship, completely throw their well-established daily routine off-kilter due to the extra time and effort they will have to spend meeting my growing physical needs.”

It's not as if they plan to one day have some kind of illness or accident that will cause them to lose their independence and be forced to live with their children. This is not the eternal hope of older adults.

Quite the opposite.

The great majority of these older adults have led lives that were about giving—not taking. They have given to their families, taken care of others. The last thing they want to be is a burden to those they love! They have hoped to remain as independent as possible to continue caring for others until the very end. Almost always it is some type of loss that drives aging parents to have to move into their children's homes. A loss of some capacity—mental or physical—that prevents them from being able to fully care for themselves.

The emotional toll is often severe. Therefore, caregivers must avoid focusing all of their attention on information and resources for addressing physical needs (e.g., activities of daily living, grooming, bathing, eating, and dressing). There is a whole other category of issues that often goes unnoticed—the emotional and psycho-social issues: issues of loss of a spouse and friends, of a family home in which they may have lived for most of their life and raised their family, of the ability to care for themselves.

*If I Walked In Her Shoes* will give you a firsthand look at these dynamics by inviting you to spend a day with two very different, yet very similar people: Rose, the elderly mother, and Sara, her dutiful daughter.

Rose and Sara exemplify these issues. You will see how their day parallels in time, but not in activity. You will experience their struggles, triumphs, and the underlying love that is the foundation of their relationship.