NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

My mother's keeper

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jul. 13, 2009

Dreamstime

My 89-year-old mother lives with us. She is in heart failure, and she has macular degeneration. She is nearly deaf. She takes drugs to thin her blood, to regulate her heartbeat, to purge fluid from her body, to elevate her mood, to lower her blood pressure, to jump-start her thyroid, to ease her pain and to help her sleep. She takes other pills to mitigate the side effects. She will not wear her hearing aids.

My mother is unsteady on her feet, and we have to hold on to her when she walks. Even so, she falls, and the falls are coming more frequently now.

She talks about bowel movements -- a lot. She talks about their frequency, consistency, color, painfulness (or not) and her desire for them to occur more frequently, as well as her desire for them to occur less frequently.

At one Thanksgiving dinner, right in the midst of the festive carving and toasting, she took out her partial plate and showed us where she had recently lost a tooth.

And yet. And yet. I know what I want, what I wish, what I desire. I know what I pictured: Me sitting by her rocking chair while she revealed abiding truths and told wonderful stories. She would tell me how to face aging and death gracefully, with faith and even joy. I would listen and learn. We would drink tea and eat homemade cookies. We would not talk about what foods give her gas.

That?s the stuff of my fantasy. But our conversation more often goes like this.

We are at the dinner table. I ask my mother, ?Do you want carrots??

She answers, ?You won?t come? Why not?? And then, a little puzzled, ?Where are you going??

I turn the volume up. I hear myself screaming about carrots. This can?t be good.

Or this. The phone rings at 7. It is my mother. She has not slept well. Her knee hurts, and she can?t get the top off her bottle of Tylenol. ?I hate those damn childproof tops,? she tells me by way of greeting, even though I long ago stopped buying anything for her with a safety cap. I say I will get the top off the damn Tylenol bottle. I

do. Not a whisper of inspiration stirs me. This, and not my fantasy, is our life together.

It is not, I sometimes muse, Mitch Albom?s Tuesdays With Morrie, the best-selling story of an elderly, dying college professor who spends his last Tuesdays on earth with a former student. You remember it, don?t you? An old man, a young man and life?s greatest lesson. Both teacher and student are richer for these days. So why do I feel that I am growing poorer -- in patience, in strength, in grace?

Then I remember: Albom spent Tuesdays with Morrie. And not even Tuesday nights. Just Tuesdays. During the day. Working hours. I can stand anyone for one day a week during business hours. I want to read 24-7 With Morrie. And the sequel: I Killed Morrie and No Jury in America Would Convict Me.

I?m not too interested in Tuesdays. I want to read about the daily-ness of old age, the daily-ness of sickness, the daily-ness of death, the daily-ness of care. I don?t want to read about visitors. I want to read about keepers. For, as any housekeeper knows, it is daily work. It is the same work, done better or worse, over and over again.

A housekeeper does the same tasks day after day. It is never enough to sweep, and be done with sweeping. Each day brings fresh dirt and debris. It is never enough to wash the dishes and be done with washing. A bed that is made will be slept in; clothes that are ironed will be wrinkled. Housekeeping is routine-keeping.

It is routine done by hand. A housekeeper doesn?t watch dusting. She dusts. A housekeeper doesn?t observe stained clothes. She washes them.

I don?t have to like it, or feel elevated by the work. I just have to do it. And, task by task, I become a woman who brings order out of chaos. I become a woman who cleans what is dirty, who puts things right.

And as it is with the work of housekeeping, so I hope it is with the work of love. Just as sweeping is an act, and not a thought, so love is an act, and not a feeling. My work is to open the Tylenol bottle, to speak up and speak slowly, to offer my arm, to help her in and out of the car, to listen. Just that, song in my heart or not. And, task by task, day by day, I become my mother?s keeper.

Melissa Musick Nussbaum is a freelance writer who lives in Colorado Springs, Colo. This is reprinted from Celebration, NCR*?s sister publication.*

The Next Step FORWARD [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *09/04/2015 - 07:55*): http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/my-mothers-keeper

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end