

Sabbath and Caring for Elderly Parents

by Patricia Hunter

It's a Friday afternoon. I wait for my mother's arrival, and can only imagine how our lives are about to change.

Years-in-the-making rhythms of daily prayers, Scripture reading, and study—as well as weekly Sabbath worship and rest—are like breathing, eating, and morning coffee. It wouldn't be life without them. But Sabbath practices are as unique and changing as my circumstances. These practices are soul anchors, with long ropes that stretch and adapt to fluctuations in my abilities and responsibilities.

But my soul-anchoring practices are drastically altered the moment my mother is wheeled through our front door on a stretcher.

Mother grimaces as the men who drove the medical transport van slide her onto the hospital bed in the middle of what used to be our master bedroom. Disabled and with dementia, Mother doesn't say a word. She trembles, cold and afraid; and though I remind her, she's confused about where she is and who I am. Her clothes are drenched with sweat and urine, and the drivers offer no explanation for what happened to the catheter she should have had when they picked her up at the rehab center hours earlier.

When the men leave, I fill the bathroom sink with warm water and remove her wet clothes. I give her a bath, dress her in clean clothes. The reality that I'm on my own sinks in. Any confidence I had that I could care for my mother as well or better than those who had been caring for her for weeks slowly evaporates as I wonder what can be done—late on a Friday afternoon—about her need for a catheter and the blistering bedsores I discover on both her heels.

Two days later, my family leaves for church without me. It's the first of many Sundays, field trips, sports and social events for which I'm left behind. Mother's complicated care is my responsibility alone. My Sabbath disappears. So does any measure of leisure time I may have carved out of our family's schedule, a schedule that includes homeschooling two teenage boys and their younger sister. Leisure time disappears in the feeding, changing, bathing, dressing and meeting of my mother's complex needs.

Beginning with feeding her breakfast, my routine with Mother is the same every day. I give her a bath and dress her in clean clothes. Using a mechanical lift, I move her out of bed into a sheepskin-lined geriatric chair that I can move around the house and onto the porch. Before the morning is over, I make her bed with fresh linens. Every. Single. Day. With massages, diligent care, and good hydration and nutrition, her bedsores begin to heal. I'm not inclined to change a thing.

Mother's laundry alone is more than a washer load. When added to the rest of the family's dirty sheets and clothes, keeping the laundry under control means washing at least two loads every day. More laundry over the weekend is added to the routine.

One Sunday, I'm aware I've created no room for a Sabbath rest or the grace and manna that comes from trusting God for my needs. I consider what work I can cease for a day without compromising Mother's care, and though it's a little thing, I give in to the nudge to not do laundry on Sunday.

I release my grip on control and open my hands to receive this small measure of Sabbath rest, and I'm given God's unique-to-me redemption of time and energy. Mondays—with twice the laundry workload added to caring for mother and homeschooling—are amazingly not more difficult.

Thirteen years ago this past Easter my no-laundry-on-Sundays ended when Mother left our home on Pollywog Creek for Heaven. Whatever Sabbath God offers me today, I receive with gratitude and the confidence that, no matter the circumstances, it will miraculously be more than enough.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Jesus,

We praise you for memories that we create with our parents. Thank you being with us and all others who find the roles of parent and child are suddenly reversed. Continue to nudge us to create time in our busy schedules for Sabbath rest. Remind us that through Sabbath, we celebrate you and show we trust in your ability to provide. We pray that we may be revitalized through the rest you give us and that our tasks do not become more difficult.

We pray this in your name. Amen.

Questions:

1. How does caring for an aging parent affect your observance of the Sabbath? Are there any new practices you have incorporated, or any you no longer are able to participate in?
2. Having parents in declining health can make you feel alone. How does your heavenly Father remind you that he will always take care of you?
3. Caring for both a parent and children at the same time is especially difficult. Do you know anyone who is doing both? How can you offer to help them so they can experience some rest?