# Living with Momma

**A Good Person's Guide to Caring for Adult Children, Aging Parents, and Ourselves**

*By Elizabeth B. Adams, MAPT*

*For the boy who asked me to prom*

*and the man I have loved dancing with for over thirty-seven years.*

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

Susan, age fifty-four, sat nervously twisting well-used tissues as she attempted to talk to me between all the tears. She was stressed out. She had every reason to be with all the responsibilities she had taken on over the past couple of years. She could not understand how, after working hard, "doing all the right things," that her life could be so out of control.

Her adult children had moved back into her home again. Her company was facing a downsizing. Her mother's cancer was finally in remission, but she still needed to chauffeur her to physical therapy after breaking a foot last month. Susan could not afford to miss any work with the company drama swirling around her, and this made the weekly therapy appointments hard to come by, so her mother was mad at her for not being "more willing to help."

Susan believed she had spent most of her life "making things work out for her family." Lately, she woke each day in a bad mood and went to bed every night too tired to sleep.

Now, she just wanted to talk about how someone with her non-stop and ever-growing schedule could ever return to enjoying life again. Was this how life was supposed to be? Should she "get used to the fact that these are some disappointing times, and just get over herself?"

Susan, like millions of Americans, was taking care of an aging parent and adult children at the same time. Today, four out of ten Americans care for an adult family member with health issues related to aging. Adding to that lifestyle pressure, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, more adult children (age thirty-five and younger) are living in their parents' home than at any time since the 1880s.

I started researching this family dynamic shift in 2011, and I tell people in similar situations about these staggering numbers because I hope they will see they are not alone. When this multi-generational family shift occurred in my family, I never saw it coming; most people I speak with do not see it coming in their lives either. Forewarned is forearmed, so to speak.

Like Susan, the majority of people I speak with are hardworking and have found themselves in very complicated lives. They are good people who have taken on the responsibility of being a caretaker for the seemingly urgent needs of those they love most. This position, of being sandwiched between the older (baby boomer) and younger (millennial and Gen Xer) generations, is further complicated because it happens right smack in the middle of life—*middle age*—when we typically tend to question issues of self-worth and identity.

Questioning our self-worth and identity is a riptide in reality. We see that what we expected to happen by this time has not and, at the midlife milestone, that those expectations are unlikely to be realized. Even without the stress of becoming a primary caregiver for an aging parent or

navigating a healthy relationship with an adult child, middle age is a time in life when divorce rates peak and major career changes are made.

Around 2007, I, too, was captured by the "clan of the sandwich generation." Consciously or not, it sneaks up on you when you are distracted: the children are (finally) ready to leave the nest and your parents are retiring (preferably to a condo in Florida so you have a free place to stay near the beach). At least that is what I remembered being told would happen around middle age. Don't all the movies, TV shows, and books about becoming empty nesters tell us that we will no longer have to stretch ourselves so thin when we hit this point in our lives? Did we miss the memo that said it's time to take a break as a reward for a job well done?

It has been said "it is easy to give advice, but it is hard to tell your story." That was where I was: I was a professional caregiver who needed help myself. I started looking for people who not only were wise members of the sandwich generation but also had the special skills of compassionate listeners. People who asked open-ended questions and offered secure spaces or, as my favorite spiritual teacher Parker J. Palmer suggests, a place "to hear my soul speak" because "the soul is shy and needs a safe place" to show itself. I searched for people with soulful qualities who were open to telling me their stories of living with aging parents and adult children. My own shy, discouraged, lonely soul needed to glean some courage from the eternally good stories of my sandwich clan.

As a practical theologian, I also knew there were sacred texts to learn from. I just needed to know where to find them.

As the old saying goes, "a toothbrush won't help you at all unless you put it in your mouth and apply it to your teeth," and that's all practical theology is—a useful tool like a toothbrush.

Even though I have a master's in theology, when it comes to spirituality I am absolutely sure of only two ideas: (1) we are all created in the image of an unconditionally Loving Creator; and (2) the soul that a perfect-loving Universal Creator breathed into us must be paid attention to.

The point of this book is to remind us of the importance of paying attention to our true self, our caring essence, our life-giving spiritual selves.

These reminders come in the form of practical theology. We will apply spiritual truths to our lives by doing actions (or suggested exercises) to remember that we already have what we need as "good" people taking care of our aging parents and adult children: increasing amounts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control (Eph. 5:22–23). These are given as gifts to our famished souls. They are promises from the Creator. They are gifts of the Holy Spirit. They are spaces where our humanity and our divinity meet and walk in the "cool of the garden" together.

Each chapter in this book introduces a question and tells stories of people who are seeking answers while being good caregivers. Each chapter also offers a broader guide to growing

valuable resources for our essential caring selves during daily interactions with family members. It is there that we see the beautiful impact multi-generational living can have on our society. These are open spaces that remind us that love should never be regulated or seen conditionally as having “a right way.” Whereas no book could include every issue the twenty-first century hands us concerning our families, this book suggests many ways we can go further and deeper in our own fruitful journeys toward securing rewarding relationships.

We will explore stories shared by people who are living with aging parents and adult children. Most of the characters and details in these stories are compilations of real-life narratives and people I have worked with, anonymized for privacy. Some stories include multiple perspectives because I was blessed with more than one family member who wanted to talk about their multi-generational lifestyle. Bottom line, these stories allow you to see that when good people are in hard situations, learning some basics in practical theology can help ease the way forward.

Chapters 1 and 2 guide you to ask two questions that open a safe space for your essential self to emerge. They introduce the concept of *LIVING* within a context of family dramas and then offer a way for you to retell your story to have an immediate and radical calming effect on heated everyday situations.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 introduce people who are *LIVING* with the gifts of being a caregiver in the foreground of their choices. They offer examples of the fruit of the Spirit (Eph. 5:22–23) that feed our famished souls and virtues that can welcome peace into our hearts. Each story shows where healing, choices, acceptance, or a view of the larger picture have transformed individual and group experiences.

Chapters 6 and 7 introduce people who are *LIVING* with some of the hard decisions we must make as caregivers. Again, stories can uncover the mistakes we cannot see until we learn to live in sync with our essential caring self. Using the paths other people are walking will guide you through emotional terrains of sharing space and resources to nourish everyone in our family, and ourselves.

Chapters 8 and 9 guide you to begin applying practical theology to your human and spiritual selves as you make the hard decisions about redefining priorities, and becoming stronger and more whole by rewriting our family stories with our own lives.You are provided a view of what acceptance, forgiveness, and rewriting outdated traditional family roles can look like while Living the Good Life.

Chapter 10 is the the space of learning to write a new chapter in your life. The previous chapters gave nourishment and some strength to your tired caregiver; this one focuses you on the new stories that can be told. You will begin to count the cost of living with a family member by focusing on the actions and events where you have the power to make positive changes within your home. At the end of each chapter you will be offered at least one concrete action found in

the form of a reflective exercise. These exercises are here to help you explore and record your own stories between where the caretaker self and the caregiver self are learning to work together. They will build upon each other as you move your way through this book. Using them you can discover some immediate effects of calming the chaos and exploring a new way to view your own needs in demanding life style changes.

The very last exercise in chapter 10 is one that I have seen used by social workers, ministers, and healthcare workers as a way to introduce "self-care." This one will specifically explore how personal healing can be discovered in acceptance. In this final exercise you can begin to see a larger view of the road map within your family history. By making your own genogram chart and then learning ways to chart your paths to more rewarding relationships with adult family members a whole new world can open up before you.

Seeing a new world of possibilities, guided by our own unique essential caring selves, is a beautiful adventure to begin. I hope this small book will offer you needed nourishment and vital strength to allow reflective learning that will happen on this adventure. While you are seeking patterns of healthy and not-so-healthy actions or beliefs, you can also taste the sweetness of the discerning fruit you inherited from family history. Kierkegaard said it best: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

My prayer for you is the courage to start telling the simple tale of uncovered beliefs infused with reflection on what were once hidden steps leading to the healing balm for our many wounds. Mainly, I hope this book will offer you a view of the past through the eyes of an adult instead of unchallenged childhood memories or culturally driven narratives, then we can all walk forward into a life of rewarding relationships with our family and ourselves.

The following story is my own rewriting of family stories when using a genogram chart and open-ended questions to prompt a retelling. That said, I introduce this story because it is where I heard my midlife call to seminary—and then the beginning of my own journey—into writing this book. Shalom.

*Hello,*

*My name at birth was Mary Elizabeth Bushong. Mary was my paternal grandmother. A dress-wearing, book-loving, legal secretary who was such a good Baptist that when I was an infant she carried me down to "her church" and had me re-baptized since she did not witness the first one, and she wanted to make sure it "took."*

*Elizabeth was my maternal great aunt, a Midwestern accounting regulations writer who spent her free time dancing down at the Arthur Murray studios. She was also the favorite aunt within the family even though it was whispered, "She is one of those feminist-lesbian Presbyterians."*

*The surname Bushong comes from the French word for "little bushes" and that is where the story of my name could end, but it doesn't. To some people, stories of ancestors and origins are*

*not all that interesting, so they will stop reading now (if they haven't already). To others, what I say next... may smack of heresy. You see, what I believe is that if I had to be born a "little bush," then I can choose to be like that bush in Exodus that would never burn up. That little burning desert bush who allowed a floating-slave-baby-turned-murdering-prince to hear his calling to be a prophet. A little bush, burning because of the loving truths, heard from deep within, by a voice named: The Great I AM.*

*So here I am, an author, a practical theologian, a willingly burning bush... weaving a story of captives that have found ways to walk away from bondage and who get filled up on the best-tasting, never-ending fruit all along the way. I will give a voice that declares: theology—and therefore religion—is* ***not*** *about rules, or laws, or regulations, but about being made in the image of the Creator, who spoke into existence everything "good."*

*As the author and perfecter of my own faith, I am claiming that my family reminds me daily that our humanity constantly needs union with our divinity. That we can all choose to stop and look when a fire is burning in our hearts because that is where humanity and divinity are meeting in the most unlikely of places—a burning bush, the cool of the garden, and even within a pregnant unwed Jewish woman named Mary.*

# Chapter 1: The Essence of a Caring Person

*All real living is meeting.*

*– Martin Buber*

*Deciphering our family secrets takes us into the heart of the family's mysterious power to impact our lives. I call this journey in the family's secret world soul-searching. … It asks us to listen to stories without our previous judgments and our habituated ways of understanding.*

*– John Bradshaw,* Healing the Shame that Binds

*Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.*

*– Kierkegaard*

Karen worked as a dental assistant for 26 years and was sure she could not take the high-pitched sound of the drill one more minute. The office had been getting on her last nerve since her boss retired and all the changes started. The once small family practice was sold to a group of investors, who built on the name and added more people. It seemed to Karen that all the new owners cared about was making a profit.

Lately, she had been feeling even the everyday sounds at home were just as hard to ignore, too. Since her adult son moved back home, sometimes she would drive around the neighborhood to delay going in the front door. She knew that when she walked in, the TV would be blaring and yet another big mess—that she had not made—would need cleaning up before she could start cooking dinner. No longer wanting to go to work or be home, she felt she did not have anywhere restful or enjoyable to go anymore.

When I met with Karen to discuss her life in the clan of the sandwich generation, she had come to a tipping point in her work-life balance. Her energy, emotions, and concentration skills were pouring out faster than could be replenished and her life felt out of control.

The term *sandwich generation* applies to people who are living their lives sandwiched between an aging parent and an adult child. In twenty-first century America, there are millions of us and that number is growing faster than we can train professionals to help support this life shift.

I handed Karen a cup of coffee and started our conversation.

"So, Karen," I said. "Could you please get us started by telling me why your adult child lives with you?"

"Well, he doesn't have money for a new place," she said in a desperate tone of voice. He got kicked out of his old apartment for having a dog that was not on the lease."

"Okay, but why does he live with *you*?" I emphasized the word *you* in case she did not hear that my question was about her, not her son.

"Well, his girlfriend's mother is a whack-a-doodle, and she—" Karen crossed her arms and talked louder than before, as though she thought I had not been listening the first time she spoke.

"Um, excuse me, Karen," I softly interrupted. "What I am trying to get clarity on is why your twenty-nine-year-old son *lives ... with ... you*?"

"I told you. He has nowhere else to go," Karen stated sharply. Her anger started to show around the edges of her eyes.

"Really?" I asked. "Nowhere? Your house is the *only* one?"

This is when she gave me that look. You know the look. Like a second head had begun to pop out right between my shoulders, and she couldn't understand why someone so odd was sitting before her.

"Okay, let me ask you this," I began again in an even softer voice. "What if you were not here? Let's imagine, for whatever reason, an illness, an accident, or something has taken *you* out of the equation. Where would your son be living today if your home was not an option?"

Karen's face twisted like she had licked a lemon, and she replied, "I don't want to think about those things. I am here. I can't imagine if my child had nowhere to live. I want him to live with me."

"So, *you want your son to live with you*," I repeated. She had finally said out loud the real reason her son was living with her.

Karen had just experienced a lot of emotions in a very short time span. She went from being confused, to frustrated, to angry, to sad and slightly tearful all within a few minutes because I asked her *one* question about living with her adult child.

That was when I asked her the first of two questions I ask everyone who lives with an aging parent or adult child. It is the question I have started (or ended) my own days with for the last ten years.

"Karen, can you please tell me *what the best thing is* about living with your adult child?"

It took a minute before she spoke, but a slight smile came on her lips and she started to tell me about the time he...

*And that was when it happened, that moment.*

A slight smile, an unexpected spark, changed the energy in the room. It spread to her eyes, and then back to her mouth in light laughter. Karen experienced that "moment" I love to witness *when people are willing* to (re)tell their story from the point of view of the "best thing about (the other person)." These stories come from a special place. That place is what theologians call the soul or essence; scholars call it presence or self; and gurus call it consciousness or self-awareness. I call it *LIVING* in the good. *LIVING* in the good is where we are seeking and experiencing the many connections between what is both human and divine within us. These connections are precious to our essential selves and throughout this book we will explore open-ended questions like the one Karen used to bring together or unite the spiritual with the human side of our caregiver selves.

## The Differences Between the Caretaker Self and the Caregiver Self

As a pastoral caregiver, I see *LIVING* as that space where humanity and divinity get a chance to meet. It is that feeling of calm, when we experience a peace that transcends all understanding. That transcendent moment when we know there is something bigger than ourselves, that connection that brings a sense of well-being. Karen's "best thing about" moment helped her calm her emotions and tap into the powerful source of peace inside her instead of remaining caught in the draining drama of being a constant caretaker and rarely a caregiver.

*Caretakers* are the busy working people who keep our world functioning. Loosely defined, they are those who support a person, an animal, or someone's property, with physical and emotional general upkeep. Often they are employed to take care of something or someone and are paid accordingly.

Caretakers can work long or short hours, depending on the specific needs of whom or what they are caring for, and those needs will constantly be changing with the seasons of the year. Studies are showing that the average person caring for aging parents will be working up to an additional (read: unpaid) 20 to 40 hours a week within the tasks of providing meals, basic domestic and general hygiene, doctors visits, dispensing medication, finding financial and medical resources, and companionship.

Being our caretaker self is essential to the needs of many in our community. It is our task-keeping, left-brain-thinking, organizational-skill-loving part of our selves. The caretaker self, for whatever reason, wants to stay busy. It needs to stay busy. Yet, it's also the side of ourselves that craves vacations, or time off, because we know we were also created with a promise we often forget to claim, the promise of a day of rest. "And on the seventh day God rested" (Gen. 2:1–3). Yep, even God rested.

Caretakers and Caregivers are different sides of the same person. The Caregiver Self is the essence of our spiritual self. The caregiver is the soulful side of ourselves that challenges the concepts that we are fixed and unchanging beings but are instead beings who are created for the "AHA!" moments in life. The caregiver side knows the impact that care and compassion have on our own hearts and minds *while* we are serving our family. It is that divine part of ourselves that can help us identify our strengths, forgive our weaknesses, and then cultivate both into life-giving successes. It is that sweet spark within us that notices a beautiful sunset, that space between hungry and satisfied, and that whisper which proclaims today was a good day, right before we fall asleep at night.

What if that peaceful, joyful, connected state Karen found in her "best thing about" story is who we really are made to be as caring people? As a former hospital chaplain, I have often witnessed these memorable moments when people meet peace just when they have reached a tipping point. The human and the divine meet in their lives, or, better said, the caretaker and the caregiver meet in their lives. These moments are in the first breath of your newborn child and will be in the last breath of your aging parent. Some of us have felt these moments at weddings, when we watch a bride and groom unite, when we move backward into the memories of our own union while being fully present to the current one.

Simply using a positive story to reframe her reactions to her son, Karen (however briefly) felt hope and joy. She had a moment when she again loved being her son's mother, instead of being the woman who "felt overworked and under appreciated." It was a living moment when her soul/spirit helped her seek what was good in her life. It was a moment when the divine image she was created to be could remind her of how "very good" she is and how good life could be—as it has been since the beginning of time. We were made in the image of the unconditionally Loving Creator of the universe (Gen. 1:27–31, 2:4–7).

## Doing No Harm Does *NOT* Mean Do Nothing

When we want to have more hope or joy while in difficult living situations, our essential caring selves may need help to reframe our actions to allow those moments. I am not talking about living in a Pollyanna moment, where we refuse to *see* what is happening all around us or just go numb to what is hard (or painful) as a way of coping with trauma.

No. No. No.

*LIVING* in the good requires us to look directly into the areas of our lives that need attention to regain a healthy spiritual and physical life. We are more like surgeons than happy-go-lucky Pollyannas. How? Like a surgeon or a doctor, we must pledge to do no harm when we see ourselves in an unhealthy state of living, *but that does not mean* we do nothing. We must notice where the problem is, be observant of where to cut into the flesh, then assess and discern the next steps in healing. We would never want a surgeon to say, "Oh, look, we found a small unidentified mass that is blocking connection between your heart and your brain. Let's just live with it, shall we?" Umm. No. We would rather have our brains and our hearts working together for optimal heath and this is true for our human and spiritual health as well. What if that peaceful, joyful, loving connected state is whom we really are made to be—but because we do not connect the spiritual with the physical we lose sight of why we are caregivers at all?

Even a professional caregiver like me had to learn that these meetings of peace can be experienced every day. They do not require a unique or even a large event, like a birth, a death, or a wedding, to arise. I started seeking those moments not just for the feeling but to manifest qualities like open-hearted compassion and the wisdom found in reflection, to hear the spiritual self, soul, spirit, and to start *LIVING* a joyful life, even in difficult times.

But, if these meetings of the body and soul happen all the time, why don't we see them all the time? More often than not, it is because we are caring people.

Wait, what? That sounds wrong. Why would being a caring person *prevent* you from living good moments more often? My favorite spiritual teacher, Parker J. Palmer, would say it is because "the soul is shy and needs to feel safe to come out." I had to learn that my caregiver self (my spiritual life) was just waiting to come out and interact with me. I needed to learn how to allow safe spaces for my busy and necessary caretaker self to interact with my peaceful nurturing caregiver self. I needed to come to it slowly (speaking gently with questions) and with

unwrapped gifts of spiritual fruit (grown ripe with contemplation) to create daily safe spaces for my humanity to enjoy meeting with my spirituality.

## Learning to Use Both Sides of our Essential Caring Self, at the Same Time

As a pastoral caregiver, I base my counseling on the premise that we have both a human and a spiritual side and that they need to operate *together* for us to flourish in our essential selves. To operate together they must meet. By taking care of my own aging parent and adult children, I came to realize that I get so busy doing the wrong things—for what I believed were the right reasons—that I forgot we do not have "to do" things to be a loving person. This realization is at once a source of freedom and shame. It is a vision of what unconditional love can look like and that can be a love we have rarely ever seen before.

Being unconditionally loving, or feeling like we do not have to be/act/or pretend perfection to be loved, can be an upsetting experience. Many of our cultural assumptions and unquestioned solutions lose meaning and can no longer function in a space of being unconditionally loved. Being willing to listen to the essential truths spoken by our essential selves when they are connected together is what Fr. Thomas Merton would have called letting go of our "false self" and what Parker Palmer would call "a hidden wholeness." Finding our hidden wholeness or facing our false self and allowing ourselves to learn to use both sides of our Essential Caring Selves at the same time.

We will talk about this more in the coming chapters, but that leads me to ask: Why would people want their human and spiritual selves to meet more often? Maybe, like me, you have noticed that always doing the right thing—but for unexplored reasons—is making you tired, sick, angry, and somehow a bit bitter and we are not really sure why. Really, things could be so much worse, right? Maybe. But I found this ideology to be a mostly unpleasant way to live life especially since being a caring person seemed to come naturally to me.

Like Karen and others in this book, we will explore how becoming "good" storytellers to our spiritual caregiving self can coax it out into the open to interact with our human caretaker self more often. We will consider ways to look at what we do—and do not do—with conscious thoughts and questions which ask: Do I have the freedom and or confidence to make choices for the good of everyone including myself?

The combined wisdom of our caring selves can build community stories that liberate our minds and actions from the existing structures (habits, fears, dogmatic roles) that often leave us tired, angry, scared, or shut down when we are in the middle of stressful lifespan situations. We can begin finding answers to how we can take care of our family and ourselves for both spiritual and physical reasons. We can firmly challenge why we want to continue trying to "do it all" and find ways to stop experiencing the anger, frustration, and exhaustion that result from trying to get *it all done*.

## We Were Created Physically and Spiritually To *BE* in Communities

Our very DNA is built on us being caregivers in a community. Anthropologists have found evidence that, for thousands of years, whole communities of our nomadic ancestors carried their wounded, crippled, and young from place to place when seeking food and other resources for survival. Why did they do that? The people they were carrying could not contribute to the group's well-being, and the community expended precious energy transporting them with each move.

This seems counterproductive to survival, right? It's all about survival of the fittest, isn't it? Nope. When re-reading Charles Darwin, we can see that his theory of survival *is not* about being the biggest and strongest, as commonly believed. It is about being the one who discovers the ability to adapt (or change) within the (sometimes unbearable) pressures of an ever-changing world.

Countless studies and curated experiences tell us that humans have an essential need for community and that it is *just as necessary* for our survival as food, water, and shelter from the elements.

Spiritually speaking, we were also created in a community of "others." In the creation story even God was not alone. There were "others" in the discussion during creation of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:26). Adam was not complete without Eve because it was not good to be alone (Gen. 2:18). And the only command that Jesus spoke was to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). The biblical concept of caring for "one another" spreads from the Torah all the way into Revelations.

If we were created both physically and spiritually to be in community, then can we be guided to notice, observe, and assess the need we have for a mind-body-spirit recovery? I say sure we can, when we are willing to be guided by questions. Open-ended questions can bring a "slanted way," as Emily Dickinson might say, in order to create safe spaces to tell *all the truths* found waiting in our shy souls as they are interacting with our human selves. I am going to suggest what may run counter to the deep listening traditions of the desert fathers and mothers: we do not have to go away (on a spiritual quest) to discover a positive change and a connection to our essential selves.

By taking care of my aging parent and adult children, we can experience our humanity-meets-divinity moments right now, right at home.

## Exercises

Perhaps you are feeling too overwhelmed taking care of your aging parent or adult children to think of doing one more thing (besides reading this book, of course). Being willing to do radical self-care is full of choices, so you can choose to do the following exercises in several ways. Some people may take as few as five minutes; others may take a whole hour to answer even one question. You can choose to answer as many or as few as you want. If you choose to skip the exercises all together, fine. Just keep reading. I suggest, however, that you stop for a minute before you skip on to the next chapter and make a promise to your tired, shy soul that you will come back to the exercises when you have finished reading.

In our first set of exercises we will begin to practice a form of self-care by noticing our own moments of peace.

**Preparing to Begin**

Get a notebook or folder where you can collect all your responses and reflections from the exercises together in one space. You may want to review this collection when you need encouragement on the journey of transforming relationships.

## EXERCISES

1. What is the best thing about living with your aging parent? What is the best thing about living with your adult child? If you have more than one child in the home, provide a separate answer for each.
2. Which child or parent was the easiest to answer this question about? Which was the hardest? Be prayerful (in whatever form is most comfortable for you) about the hardest and easiest answers. We will seek understanding to your answers in the next chapter(s).
3. Write out Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 2:15–25. Why do you think there are two versions of the creation story? Which one have you heard most often? Which one do you connect with the most and why?