

THE LADDER OF LOVE



INTRODUCTION

I believe we are called to honor and care for our parents until their very last days of life. God commands us to honor thy father and thy mother in Exodus 20:12. He felt this commandment was so important that He wrote it with His own finger on stone.

This story is a beautiful example of a daughter's struggle to keep her mother at home. She likens going through the stages of her mother's Alzheimer's disease to descending a ladder rung by rung.

INSPIRATIONAL VERSE

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying

their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.

I TIMOTHY 5:3-4

MESSAGE

Mom was only seventy-one, in great health, fun-loving, vivacious, and outgoing when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Strange as this may sound, that diagnosis was a relief! She and we knew something was wrong, so we were all relieved to learn that there was a medical reason for her forgetfulness.

Mom had enough wits about her to worry that others might think she was just dumb or forgetful. In fact, she proudly added the "news" of her diagnosis to her annual Christmas letter.

I learned to view Mom's Alzheimer's as though it was a two-sided ladder, with each rung representing a year. When life was normal, Mom advanced in age up one side of the ladder, but with Alzheimer's she began to move down the other. This simple imagery allowed me talk about her situation in ways that really helped me communicate what was happening.

When Mom "turned six" on the back side of the ladder, my granddaughter, Jaiden, was also six. Mom *loved* Jaiden, but suddenly this innocent six-year-old irritated Mom. She would scold, pick on, and blame Jaiden whenever something was missing or broken. This behavior was surprising and frustrating to me

until I caught a TV program about young girls fighting. That's when I realized that my mom was just a little girl too.

At "five years" Mom discovered boys and developed a crush on Ed, who happened also to live in the memory support unit. She talked about him constantly. She would primp and fuss to make sure that he noticed her. Ed was married and his wife visited him daily, but that didn't matter. Mom was convinced it was just his mother! Mom always did have an eye for the good-looking men!

When Mom "turned three" I moved her into my home. It seemed such a waste to be paying all that money for her to live elsewhere when she still needed me to be with her each day. By now Mom couldn't entertain herself. Like most three-year-olds, she demanded my full attention—following me from room to room, staring impatiently at me when I was on the phone, and pouting when I didn't have time to play with her.

Luckily, I discovered an activity that kept Mom's attention. Just like every three-year-old, Mom liked to sort! And when I moved her into my home, I brought her rather large collection of costume jewelry along. It turned out to be the perfect activity! She would sit and sort for hours. Item after item got a close inspection before she would look for the exact match. It was perfect for Mom and perfect for me!

Seeing Mom happy made me happy, but it also made me sad. It was at that point that I knew I had to let go of the Mom I once knew. She was gone. I leaned

heavily upon my faith and prayers. It felt as if I was mourning my mother's death while caring for the child she had become.

At "two" things got harder. I should have known—they don't call them the *terrible twos* for nothing! Mom's vocabulary shrank. Her temper tantrums worsened. She became jealous of my husband. She would meet me at the door pointing and glaring at him. She would mutter and mumble about "him" without end. I explained to her that Jeff was my husband, that I loved him, and that she needed to be nice to him. But like a two-year-old, she rejected everything that she couldn't understand.

Fortunately, I was blessed by marrying an extremely patient and kind man. He knew it was the disease talking, not my mother. It didn't matter—it still hurt! It still *looked* like my mom. It still *sounded* like my mom. It was next to impossible not to respond. I started to take out my frustrations on my family. I cried—a lot! Mom loved it when Jeff and I would fight. She'd make comments like "What is *he* doing here? I thought we got rid of him!"

It felt as if I was losing my family. Yet somehow I had to face reality. I knew that I could no longer handle this alone. I prayed for God's guidance about the difficult decision just ahead.

I live by the motto Look, see, and tell the truth. I didn't have the time, mental capacity, or energy to give my husband, my children, or my grandchildren what they needed. I wasn't taking care of myself.

Finally, I moved Mom back into an Alzheimer's

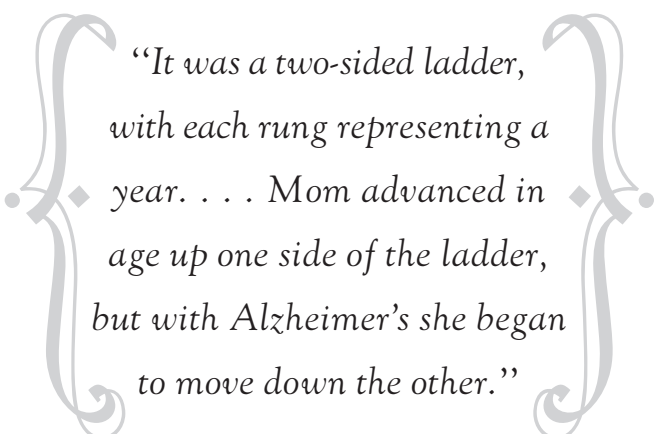
care center. It was the right decision, but it was also the most difficult thing I've ever done. It felt like abandoning my baby! What would she do without me? What if she got scared? What if she needed me? What if no one knew what she was trying to say? What if she thought I didn't love her anymore?

Mom is now around "eighteen months" on her age ladder. She babbles and uses her hands to try to tell me what's going on. Her face lights up with delight when I come to visit. She blurts out one of the few words she has left. "*Really? Really?*" she stammers. Mom is in diapers most of the time and has trouble keeping her balance. In most every way, she's a toddler.

I bathe her (she loves playing in the water!), fix her hair, or go with her for ice cream. My favorite time now is cuddling on the couch and reading Bible stories to her. She just loves hearing my voice, but it's the sound of my voice, not the words and stories, that provides solace and acceptance.

I try to give her everything I can. I want to take care of her the way she took care of me. When I tuck her in at night and tell her I love her, I'm almost overcome with joy. She just smiles and in a timid little voice says, "I lo-lo-lo-love you too." The disease changed everything, but there's one thing that it can't take away from me: She is still my mom and I love her with all my heart.

LuAnn Anglo

A decorative frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork on the left and right sides, enclosing the quote. The frame is light gray and has a classic, elegant design.

*“It was a two-sided ladder,
with each rung representing a
year. . . . Mom advanced in
age up one side of the ladder,
but with Alzheimer’s she began
to move down the other.”*

CAREGIVER’S PRAYER

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,

When you called me to care for my mother I never dreamed it would be this difficult. Please open my eyes to opportunities that surround me to stimulate and interact with her throughout the day. Help me to see that spending time with my mother is a privilege and a blessing, and not a burden.