

When mothers become children

It's now one foot, now the other

by Marvin Olasky

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations." That's how Psalm 90 begins, and it notes later on, "The length of our days is 70 years — or 80, if we have the strength."

Psalm 90 has a unique byline: "A prayer of Moses the man of God." The book of Deuteronomy ends by specifically pointing out that Moses did not die at 70 or 80, but 120. Even at that age, "his eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated."

This was an exceptional kindness of God. But what happens when eyes dim and vigor disappears?

A sweet picture book published in 1980, Tomie de Paola's *Now One Foot, Now the Other*, tells of how an old man named Bob helps teach his grandson to walk. "Hold on to my hands, Bobby," the granddad says. "Now one foot, now the other."

Bob and Bobby are very close, so Bobby often says to Bob, "Tell me the story about how you taught me to walk." And Bob does.

Then granddad has a stroke and spends months in the hospital. When he comes out it seems that he'll never talk or walk again, but Bobby helps to feed his granddad and one day hears him say, "You. Me. Walk." Bobby teaches his granddad to walk again: Now one foot, now the other.

The story ends with the granddad saying, "Bobby, tell story how you teach Bob to walk." The grandson says, "You leaned on my shoulders, and then I said, 'Now one foot, now the other.' And before you knew it . . .".

Last month, on Good Friday, the legs of my 87-year-old mother suddenly buckled beneath her. She fractured her left hip and her left elbow. Since surgery on Easter Sunday and several days in recovery, she's been living on the sub-acute care wing of our local hospital, trying to learn to walk again.

The operations on her hip and arm went well, but recovery is slow. "The pain is excruciating," she moans as she allows herself to be bathed and toileted. She is dependent on others for hygiene, for moving her from bed to chair, for amusement. Like a child she has trouble with her memory and with emotional control: Things hurt, things are scary, and her mind isn't clear.

Each day is a decision: Is life worth living with pain and the constant small indignities that infirmity brings? Sometimes my mother doesn't think so, especially on a day when a busy nurse leaves her sitting on the pot for 45 minutes. An aide having a tough morning may start treating her as an object rather than a human being.

When I expressed appreciation to an especially tender nurse, she said she was merely treating my mother as she would want her own to be treated. But little things make big differences: A nurse's gentle hands, patient attitude, and big smile can help my mother face another day.

Every day my mother has to learn to walk again, but it hurts. My wife and I become like football coaches saying, "No pain, no gain," as she tries to remember the steps to get up and inch forward — first one foot, then the other.

The role reversals are as striking as those affecting Bob and Bobby. A long time ago my mother read me bedtime stories; now my first novel is due out next month and the chapters are bedtime stories for her. (I skip some of the scarier parts.)

Folks react to personal difficulties in different ways: denial, despondency, or gutting it out. My mother is a mix of despair and guts. But her roommate, Eunice, combines courage with the realization that she doesn't have to do it alone, because the God who is with her presents new gifts every morning.

Sometimes Eunice's attitude is catching. Last week my mother went out in her wheelchair and said of the warm sun, "Delicious." I tell her that Christianity is for people who know we are spiritually helpless, unable to do anything for ourselves.

Maybe physical helplessness will enable her to grab onto the truth of what Jesus said: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."