

Mum lives with us now

Caring for an elderly parent in the home can be a challenge for all parties concerned, and not every family is able to cope. But it can also be a source of blessing and opportunity, says Carmel who shared the following reflections with me:

It took a while for me to grieve and accept the fact that my mother was not the person she used to be - once so active and independent, and now so frail. At first I would get impatient, even angry, when she would stumble over the simplest task or ask me the same question repeatedly. But then it started to sink in that she wasn't being difficult or careless, she was just growing old and her health was deteriorating. Gradually I have come to a more peaceful acceptance of this new stage in life, of having her live with us at home, and I am more gentle and tender towards her.

I do admire Mum's acceptance of her own situation. She is often feeling unwell, but she never complains. There is something noble about that. The loss of dignity in having to be assisted with basic bodily functions - she accepts all of this and never whines. For me it has been a real learning curve. Helping her in this area on a daily basis is something that I never thought I could do. 'That's not me,' I would think. But now it is me.

It's lovely to see the great-grandchildren interacting with her. The little ones are not the

least put off by age or illness. As soon as they come through the door they are looking for their great-grandma, kissing her, commandeering her walking stick to use as a hobby horse or light sabre. There is something beautiful about seeing life's continuity - the newest grandchild in the same room as the family member living out her last days. The other night we had our daughter and her children stay over, so we had four generations under one roof. Talk about the circle of life!

There are humorous moments, too. The day before Mum had to go up to the hospital for some tests, she insisted on getting her hair set at the local salon! Even at ninety, taking pride in her appearance is important.

While my mother struggles to recall things that happened 15 minutes ago, her long term memories flow easily. When I hear her reminisce - about living through the war years, the depression, the difficulties of an inter-faith marriage in a previous era - it helps me to respect the challenges she has tackled and the sacrifices she has made, whether it be providing financially for her family or passing on her Catholic faith.

Mum was a teacher for many years and sometimes past students call by to thank her for the time and talents she shared with them. They are always full of gratitude and admiration and it helps me to appreciate afresh my own mother and her gifted and generous life.

Our new life together has plenty of stresses and challenges. Most difficult, perhaps, is not being able to just go and do things spontaneously. Everything has to be planned around her daily routine. However, overall it has brought me closer to her as a daughter and deepened my admiration for my husband who has so warmly welcomed her into our home. With Mum's declining health, the future is always uncertain, but we try to take one day at a time. •

