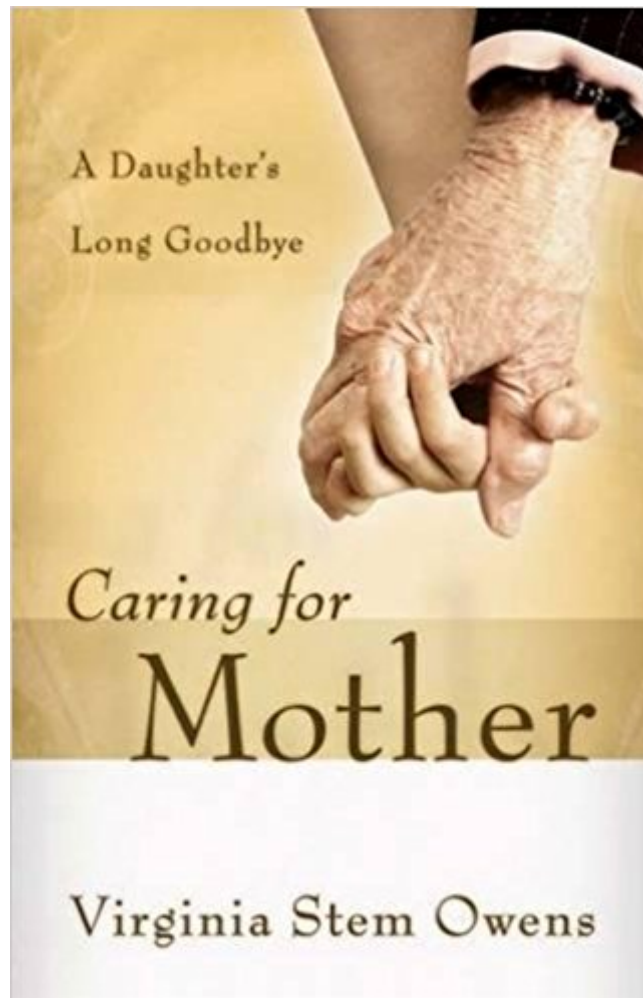




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Caring For Mother: A Daughter's Long Goodbye



Synopsis

In *Caring for Mother*, Virginia Stem Owens gives a clear and realistic account of caring for an elderly loved one. Along the way, Owens notes the spiritual challenges she encountered, not the least of which included fear of her own suffering and death. This book will be a helpful companion to those who have recently assumed the role of caregiver, helping them anticipate some of the emotional turbulence they will encounter along the way.

Book Information

Paperback: 175 pages

Publisher: Westminster John Knox Press; 1 edition (June 4, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0664231527

ISBN-13: 978-0664231521

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.4 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 23 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #825,672 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #70 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Parkinson's Disease](#) #392 in [Books > Parenting & Relationships > Aging Parents](#) #726 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Ethics](#)

Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Death is never timely: it comes either too soon or too late. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion recounts the aftermath of her husband's sudden death at the dinner table. At the other edge of the spectrum, Owens describes seven years preceding her mother's relentless descent into dementia, "God's own breath slowly leaking out through the fissures in her brain." Afflicted first with Parkinson's, then small strokes and Alzheimer's disease, Mrs. Stem eventually required round-the-clock care. Owens moved next door and spent hours every day with her: "All I could do was squat beside the avalanche, listening for any sign of life; sometimes I could hear a faint but familiar echo of her voice or gesture from under the heap." Through essays as incisive and insightful as Didion's, this account succeeds on multiple levels: medical detective story, personal memoir, flawless description, philosophical and spiritual exploration (where is the self when the brain no longer functions normally?). Owens offers not self-help but hope as she bears witness to the grief and glory of life's ending: "If love... weren't the center from which life flows, if it didn't, as

Dante says, move the stars, how could we bear such weight?" (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

With the 85-and-older population the fastest-growing segment of the elderly, and with millions of baby boomers sprinting toward their ranks, the likelihood of encountering Alzheimer's oneself or in a family member should increase exponentially in coming decades. Counting herself among this population-in-waiting, Owens offers this thought-provoking memoir of her family's nearly seven-year-long ordeal with her mother's illness. Portraying additional struggles with her own and her father's age-related medical issues, she yet drives home the relentlessness of Alzheimer's demands on its sufferer's circle of support. No matter a spouse's heart condition, or a daughter's challenged vision; mother's wandering off at any moment must take precedence. Owens and her father tended her mother a year and a half before the illness demanded nursing-home care. Though the nursing home offered release from 24/7 duty and relieved certain fears and responsibilities, her mother's condition still obliged considerable time commitment from the rest of the family. Rather than belaboring the losses it entailed, Owens makes her experience instructive and conducive to reflection by readers facing similar challenges. Chavez, Donna

Virginia Stem Owens's latest book is a tremendously valuable account of the author's intricate relationship with her elderly mother, ill with dementia. While it reads as an absorbing narrative--sometimes sad, sometimes funny, always keenly honest--it also offers a carefully observed and researched medical history, bound to be instructive to both older and younger readers. When her mother's physical frailty became problematic and Owens left her Kansas home to stay nearby her parents in Texas, she had no idea the sojourn would span seven years. In that time, her mother's diagnosis moved from Parkinson's disease to Alzheimer's, and Owens watched what she calls the "slow dismantling" of the intelligent and capable person she had known all her life. What distinguishes this book from other records of a similar kind is Owens's unfailing sense of irony. She takes no prisoners. No one, including herself or her mother, is spared her perceptive eye and subtle wit. Doctors and medical staff particularly, are depicted with total frankness--too busy, too hasty, forgetful, insensitive--including the psychiatrist who tells the patient chirpingly to "get out more" and "find a purpose in life." Yet the book is fair and full of compassion and the tone throughout is exactly right, an unusual accomplishment when the topic itself runs the gamut of emotions and human idiosyncracies. This is a tough record to read, but hardly depressing, and a wise-spirited author helps you through.

Though the title did not sound promising, I try to read every personal account of Alzheimer's I come across, so I bought this book and sat down with it one night in my reading chair--and didn't get up for three hours. The writing was fluid, the characters strong, the dilemmas painful and eternal. "Caring for Mother" turned out to be both subtle and incisive, an essential book on dementia and patient care, perfectly contained in 163 pages. "This is not a cheerful book," Virginia Owens explains in her Opening Note, "but it is truthful." It's truthful, and it's vivid. The book has a story to tell, as it tracks the author's mother through an ever-increasing dementia toward what we know from the start will be a disaster. In the early chapters Virginia Owens helps look after her mother at home. Her mother has little faith in medicine: "She goes to the doctor the way I went to church as a teenager, bitter and under duress. She takes her pills like an apostate receiving communion, with little hope in their efficacy. A dark night for both soul and body." It's worse later, in the nursing home--that place, Owens says, "the name of which strikes terror into every person's heart." When she goes to visit her mother, most of the other residents ignore her. She doesn't blame them, "They had every right to their withdrawal. Only a handful of residents have visitors who come on even a weekly basis. Most are visited occasionally, some rarely or never. People who've been abandoned develop a thick coat of defensive frost." Owens' indictment of nursing homes is calm, steady, devastating. It's as abiding as the anger she sees in the residents: "You can feel it as soon as you come in the door. Cold Rage. For most of the people parked in wheelchairs, their anger has gone so stale after years of overuse that the emotion is routine now.... Anyone is culpable who comes through the front doors and is free to leave again under their own steam." Owens does her best for her mother, the best that she can manage. But what never goes away, she says, what "doesn't wear out or disappear, is the feeling--no, the certain knowledge--that I could have done more, done better." I could quote half this book, it's so good.

This book is a **MUST** read for anyone dealing with Parkinson's or any dementia related disease. It is word for word what I have experienced in the last 2 years with my parents. My Mother had Parkinson's and my Dad was taking care of her alone. I walked into a nightmare and overnight all of our worlds were changed forever. I thank you so much, Virginia, for writing this book and sharing your story with us. It affirms what my family and I have been going through in every single phase of any given day. Now I know I'm not crazy. This has been very hard and I need to be gentle with myself and to realize that I can't and won't just "spring back" over night and be back in my "normal little world" again. This book will help people to understand where their loved one is and how **THEY**

feel as the decline of Parkinson's sets in. I read it and look back and have "a ha" moments throughout the book. I'm just sorry I didn't know these things at the time. But, at least I can know it now, thanks to your insights and hopefully other people can learn from this book as they are going through this walk with a loved one. Blessings to you, Virginia, and to those who pick this book up and read it. Profound information, to say the least.

If you are a child turned "carer" this is a must read. It will strike close to home and true to heart.

This is the first book I've read of Virginia Stem Owens and it's an engaging memoir. Her mother's illnesses propel the book in incremental fashion and points. If you are caring for an elderly parent or person (which I am) it is informative. If you are looking for sentimental memoir look elsewhere. I picked this book for that reason and to try to help me through the trials of my own life and it turned out to be the perfect choice. The trials Owens and her mother go through are heart wrenching and frustrating but she keeps the facts straight and the sentimentality low. She forges through all the trials with very little emotion. But the last chapter reels it all in and encircles you with hope and strength. It's a good, informative, strength building read.

Thoughtful journey from the early days of caregiving for one's parents through the day to day experiences. Cherish the good days, be thankful for small gifts, yell at God not your loved one, watch for signs of your loved one, do your best, and most of all do the hardest thing Stay - and be there beside the rubble for them. Have given this book to friends who are about to embark on this journey - it has always been well received.

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