

## Life Quilts

By Christine Dossey

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Each year, Active members of the Junior League of Waco are required to attend at least one training session. I am one of those people who just loves to learn, and this being my first Active year of membership, I was impressed with the number and variety of training topics scheduled and excited about the opportunity to participate in several of them. I signed up for "Caring / Planning for Aging Parents" with my 87-year-old mother-in-law in mind, but also with a more distant realization that I should know more about caring for my own parents one day. I expected to receive nuts and bolts information about long-term care options and services but came away with something far better—a better understanding of my mother-in-law, a better understanding of myself, and an understanding of the "quilt" of life.

The speaker for the session was Dr. James Ellor, director of the Center for Gerontological Sciences at Baylor University's School of Social Work, and well-known as an expert in his field. When JLW members arrived at the training that evening, we found chairs placed in a circle around the room rather than the usual theatre or table style setup. Dr. Ellor did not begin a factual, informative presentation, but rather began

by introducing himself and asking us which of us was dealing with an aging relative and inviting several participants to talk a bit about why we were there. Everyone seemed to have a story to share and each story was different—some very personal, some painful, some joyful—but many of the same feelings seemed to emerge for the women who shared their stories.

The commonality was that caregiving is stressful and often brings on feelings of grief, guilt, and anxiety for caregivers as well as the person receiving the care—no one should try to bear the caregiving responsibility alone. Dr. Ellor said that caring for an aging parent should not be left up to one person as it unfortunately is in many families. Dr. Ellor emphasized that every member of a family needs a role in caring for an elderly parent, and suggested that family members should split up the responsibilities. For example, one can be responsible for shopping, one for doctor appointments and medications, one for financial matters, and so on.

Even one who lives far away can be responsible for telephoning, writing weekly letters, and sending cards and photos, for example. If multiple family members are not available, caregivers should try to expand their support system to include extended family, friends, church members, home health care workers, and community agencies.

According to Dr. Ellor, caregiving is all about how you look at it—it can be thought of as a terrible thing one must get through, or as an incredible gift. In years past, and today, in other cultures, aging is viewed as a normal and beautiful process of life and the elderly are highly respected for their contributions and wisdom. In our fast-paced, increasingly impersonal, throwaway society, our elderly are often hidden away, avoided, forgotten, or don't

receive the respect they deserve as human beings who have lived lives we can appreciate and learn from.

Dr. Ellor gave us a lot to think about in our short hour together. One statement that really spoke to me was, "You tend to parent your parent, the way your parent parented you." That made me stop and think back on the wonderful way my parents raised me and the hope that I will do half as well with them when the

time comes. Another scary realization came when I thought about my own shortcomings in raising my son and the need to make some changes, with the realization that someday he will probably be parenting me—will I want him to parent me the way I parented him?

For me, the central idea in Dr. Ellor's presentation was his analogy that life is like a quilt, and the making of it never ends. Each patch can be thought of as a life experience—first lost tooth, first kiss, graduation, wedding day, birth of a child, loss of a dear friend, your child's first day of school, a career highlight, divorce, a tragedy, a vacation, a conversation. The differences in quilts (lives) aren't the patches—because we all have them—it's in how they're put together. As we live our lives, we need to think about how we're assembling our "quilts" and, when a loved one passes away, rather than dwelling on our own feelings of guilt or grief, we should simply feel a great responsibility for sharing that quilt (life experience) with others.

