

Bless Our Wandering Spirits

A family's Perspective

by Meg Peterson

"We can't do it. It's not fair. You remember how she felt about Aunt Ella. 'This must never happen to me,' she said. 'Please don't let it.'" Tears streaked my sister Anne's face.

Aunt Ella had spent her last days tied into her bed at a large nursing home. Mother, her devoted niece, finally stopped visiting.

"I can't bear to see her lying there all day," she had said. "Just walking into that cold institution frightens me. Can you imagine how the residents feel? But I doubt that anybody has the time to even listen to them. And the smells...oh, girls, it's awful!"

Frustration, anger, and hopelessness welled up in me. Caring for my mother, even if we took turns, would have been a full-time job for each of us. And would she have been happy shuttling back and forth...and being part of our rather frenetic lives? But then the guilt took over. Hadn't she given and given to us and to our families? Now it was our turn.

Fortunately, Anne lives in Peterborough. "There is an alternative to nursing homes," she said one day, after we'd exhausted every possibility we knew, including hiring round-the-clock home health care professionals. "And it's a better life than anything we've tried, besides being much less expensive. It's like a caring home...the kind you'd enjoy being a part of. It's called Maplewood Manse, and is licensed as a Residential Care Facility. Max Sargent, who runs the home, used to work in a large nursing home, and wanted to try a

smaller, more personal approach. He's everybody's father, brother, and savior rolled up into one."

"Well, it has a perfect name for a minister's wife, but can Mom qualify?" I asked. She was nearly incontinent and often wandered from her room. "I don't want anybody tying her in a chair!"

"Don't worry about that. They treat their people like human beings, listen to them, try to understand their feelings and their needs. It's a small place, and the staff can give individual attention and allow each person to retain his or her dignity. If I hadn't seen it, myself, I wouldn't have believed such places existed."



Grace Noble and her daughter, Meg Peterson

"But the rooms...how can they fit fifteen people comfortably into one house?" I asked.

"It's just like one of those old parsonages we lived in as children," she explained. "The bedrooms are large and sunny, and there's a living room with a piano, aquarium, and comfortable furniture."

"And the meals, that's the best part," she continued. Max and his assistants are gourmet cooks. I stayed for dinner last night and have already asked for two recipes. They bake a bread you'd die for! This is not institutional food. The idea is to enjoy, not to count every calorie. They experiment with new recipes, so mealtime is

something to look forward to. Everybody sits at tables of three or four as a fancy restaurant. A few people have trays brought into their rooms at breakfast so they can lounge in their pajamas for a bit."

It's been two years since Mother moved to Maplewood Manse. I haven't seen her happier in years! She enjoys the unstructured activity, the personal attention, the comings and goings of the head nurse and her aides—whose children sometimes visit and give an almost forgotten glimpse of the joys of grandchildren.

Every holiday is a special occasion—rabbits and colorful eggs at Easter, red hearts with lace on Valentine's Day, and decorated cakes—with party hats and favors—for birthdays.

Nothing is too much trouble for Max and his staff. They enjoy the people, and learn about their lives to see them not just as they appear now, but also at other stages of a full life. They are seen as individuals, as family.

Anne called me last Christmas. "Mom has just returned from a bus ride into Peterborough to see the lights," she said. "You should have seen her face—like a child's, all aglow. I don't know how much she'll remember, but at that moment she was as happy and contented as I've ever seen her."

In May, Max wrote me an enthusiastic letter, in which he described spring coming to Maplewood. "The folks are beginning to get out for their daily walks in the fresh air, which puts a different perspective on life. Soon the outdoor barbecues will begin—a wondrous and sometimes comical event with the wandering spirits."

Thank God we have places like Maplewood Manse with staff who care about our beloved, wandering spirits.