

# Why Do You Think I Call You Mama?



“*W*here did you go to school?”  
What an odd question, I thought. She should know the answer to that! After all, she and Dad helped pay for college. Okay. I’ll play. “Eastfield for the first two years, then on to Stephen F.”

“Debbie did, too.”

I looked at Mom. “Who is Debbie?”

“My daughter,” Mom answered.

“Who am I?” I asked quizzically and with furrowed brow.

“Aren’t you my niece or my relative?”

That Sunday afternoon conversation, sitting on a bench on the front porch, was the moment in time I realized my own mother did not know who I was. My heart shattered into a billion pieces.

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Exodus 20:12 states, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” Even if it was not a commandment with a promise, I would still abide by and obey this verse. It was my honor and privilege to be the sole caregiver in my home for my sweet and devout Christian mother for more than five years. Gathering around the kitchen table for family meals, and saying grace before we ate was the norm. Mom and I continued to give thanks to God at mealtime, even after she moved in with me. If she became confused or forgetful while praying, she always said God knew what she meant. I believe He did.

After falling and breaking her hip, having hip-replacement surgery, going through rehab, falling and breaking her hip again, having a second hip-replacement surgery and going through rehab again, in June 2008, my mom moved in with me for in-home rehab and memory care.

As her condition deteriorated, my caregiving duties increased and became more involved. Though everything I did came from a heart of unconditional love, it wasn't easy by any stretch of the imagination. Every single day she called me her angel, but sometimes I felt like my horns were holding up my halo!

The purpose of this book is threefold.

First, I want the millions of unpaid caregivers to know that, even though their experiences are unique and personal to them, the journey is a shared one.

## *Deborah Keys*

Many have experienced or will soon experience the common anguish of unrelenting stress in dealing with the intimate care of a loved one. Hopefully, it helps to know you are not alone, though you may be by yourself. The roller coaster of emotions you are experiencing is perfectly normal. I pray the information in this book will give you the encouragement and validation you need during those times you need it most.

Second, if you anticipate ever needing a caregiver, please begin making provisions and preparations now. Your family and friends will thank you.

Third, if you are not currently a caregiver, please keep reading so you can understand and provide support and encouragement to someone who is.

If you are currently a caregiver, I encourage you to keep a journal, either written or video. It helps with organization for doctor visits, provides a forum for stress relief, improves your own memory, and benefits your own personal health and well-being. It also helps you adjust your own perspective.

My dad passed away several years before my mom's diagnosis of dementia. Early in our journey, Mom was able to stay in her house by herself. Because my brother, Philip, worked in close vicinity to her house, he checked on her during the day, and I stayed on the weekends.

Frequent and multiple daily phone calls and medication monitoring kept her somewhat independent until one sunny spring day when she fell outside and

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broke her hip. Two angels of mercy “happened” to be driving by, saw her lying on the ground, stopped, and went to her rescue.

My best guess is that one of them stayed with her while the other went into the house and called for an ambulance. Their identities remain a mystery, but our family will always be grateful that they came to my mom’s rescue. The ambulance took her to the nearest hospital, but later that day we transferred her to a hospital closer to my house, where she soon had hip-replacement surgery.

The surgery went well, and afterward, she entered a nearby rehabilitation facility to recover. That was quite an experience. On more than one occasion, I had to go to the facility and calm her down so she would go to sleep. One night about 9:00 P.M., Mom was extremely upset, so the nurse called me to come and calm her so she would go to bed. When I arrived at the facility, I found Mom sitting in a wheelchair in the lobby with one shoe on her foot while clutching the other one in her hand. Two aides were attending to her as much as she would let them. She was convinced someone had thrown all of her possessions in the creek. It was her stuff, and she wanted to keep her stuff. Talking to her, using the calmest voice I could find, I convinced her that her stuff was safe and not in the creek. We would straighten out everything in the morning. Finally, she went to bed. I held her hand and soothed her for what seemed like an eternity.

## *Deborah Keys*

After her two-month stay in rehab, she moved into my house with me. Near the end of her first month's stay, she fell and re-broke her hip while I was out of town, and my brother was on duty. I received the phone call just as I was arriving at my hotel in California for a trip that had been planned for quite some time. Mom had her second emergency surgery, this time while I was out of town. When I returned I drove straight from the airport to the hospital. My brother left, and I was on duty again.

When my mother moved in with me, I had no earthly idea—not an inkling—of how dramatically my life would change.

As you read my journal entries, keep in mind that, originally, I had no intention of publishing any part of this very personal journey. There were some days I did not journal anything. Sleep seemed more important on those nights, and sometimes one day blended into the next. Just because every day is not included, I want you to know that this book contains condensed excerpts from more than five years of journaling everything from Mom's broken hip to the inevitable day of moving her into a long-term care facility.

In May of 2005, I retired from twenty-nine years of teaching junior high school. However, I continued working almost every day substitute teaching at the junior high school from where I retired, so not much really changed as far as going to work every day. Leaving Mom at home on the days I worked certainly had its

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challenges. Teaching junior high school is where I believe God taught me to develop the patience I would need to live with abundant grace while caring for Mom.

Mother Keys moved in with me on Saturday, June 7, 2008. At first I kept all of the bedroom doors open at night so, in the event Mom needed help, I would hear her call and could assist her. After a while I locked my door at night. I'll explain why later.

### **Monday, June 9, 2008**

At 4:30 A.M. the hall light flashed on. I found Mom at the living room end of the hall, clutching the walls for balance.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?” I quizzed.

She answered, “I don't want to go to the field today. I'm too tired.”

We turned around and shuffled slowly back to her room. Oh my gosh! Maybe she had been looking for something. I don't know. In her room I found the blinds open, get well cards scattered on the floor, the walker pushed aside, bedside toilet used and moved, magazine basket kicked aside, and lamp knocked over on to the bed. No lights on! I escorted her back to bed.

### **Tuesday, June 10, 2008**

Tucked Mom in and kissed her good night at 10:15 P.M. the night before. At midnight she was on the

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bedside toilet. At 2:00 A.M. she was up and using the toilet. At this point I attached a personal alarm to her pajamas so I could get up and help her if she awakened and got out of bed. At 5:00 A.M. I heard the personal alarm sounding. That meant she had moved enough to get out of bed. I rushed in and had some trouble reattaching the alarm to silence it. In the meantime, she had worked her way to the other side of the bed next to the wall. I walked her around the end of the bed and tucked her back in after she used the bedside toilet. Restroom again at 7:00 A.M. Finally awakened her at 9:00 A.M.

### **Wednesday, June 11, 2008**

Put Mom to bed at 10:30 P.M. the night before. Still awake in my room at 11:30 P.M. I heard a noise in the hall. I opened the door, and Mom was dragging her bedside toilet behind her. She asked if she could sleep with me. Of course she could! I set up the toilet on her side by my dresser.

Here was the course of the night. She got up to use the toilet as follows:

12:30 A.M.    1:27 A.M.    3:15 A.M.    5:00 A.M.

At 5:00 A.M. she “regretted sending invitations because I am tired.”

*No wonder!* I let her stay in bed until 9:00 A.M.

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### **Sunday, June 15, 2008—Father's Day**

At 3:39 A.M. I spied a shadowy figure in my bedroom doorway. I sprang out of bed to help Mom back to her own. Yes, she was walking without her walker. She said the bed was wet, her panties were soaking wet, and there was a leak in the kitchen.

“Let's take care of it tomorrow,” I said. “Let's go back to bed now.”

Since her panties were MIA, I put clean ones on her, and then to bed she went. She had used the bedside toilet, the bathroom toilet, and she had put her wet panties in *my* bathroom sink.

Got her up at 8:45 A.M. While taking her sponge bath, she sat on the portable toilet seat in the bathroom. (For some reason, the portable toilet seat had been moved away from the commode and over by the door.) Without warning she crapped all over the floor. Oh my gosh! I remained calm. I finished getting her ready and cleaned her bathroom and the house. My shower felt so good today.

### **October 22, 2008**

As I parked my car in the garage after a long day of teaching junior high students, I smelled it. Burned food. I closed my eyes, said a prayer, took a long, deep breath and slowly counted to ten to calm myself.

I walked into the kitchen. She was standing there looking forlorn. Potatoes were in two separate

pots,—one mashed and three single slices in the other one—but the beans were cooked. I walked over and hugged her. She looked relieved. A “hint” of smoke filled the air. Nothing looked burned. What had happened? She had no memory, so she was no help. Stuff was out of place. The cast iron skillet had water in it, and the dish scrubber was totally black, not yellow. Where did the burned food go? Trash? Down the drain? Outside? In the yard? Who knew?

I turned on all exhaust fans and opened the doors to clear out the smoke. We fixed dinner and talked. She didn’t remember anything that happened during the day. Didn’t even know the nurse had come.

## **Any Given Sunday—Getting Ready for Church**

My sweet Southern Baptist Christian mama dressed up for church every Sunday. That meant dress, hosiery, makeup, and hair. Now, at this stage of the game, trying to put pantyhose on Mom was a very ambitious endeavor. Because of time constraints, I tried helping her. Handing the pantyhose from my hand to hers, I asked her to gather up this leg—meaning the leg of the pantyhose.

As I looked in her closet for clothes she could wear, I didn’t pay attention to what she was doing. When I turned around, she had grasped her hands around her right knee and gathered her folded leg close to her chest. She had literally done what I had asked her to

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do: gathered up her legs! Lying flat on her back with both knees drawn up to her chest, her “nether” region was staring me in the face.

I started laughing so hard I cried. She had no clue. Carefully, and through laughter and tears, I reworded my request, and she complied. From that day forward she wore knee-high hosiery and pants to church.

Getting her ready was such a production that sometimes it did not seem worth the effort.

### **December 24, 2009**

We went to my aunt’s house for Christmas Eve and had dinner with her and my cousin. The menu was pizza and salad, and we took some dessert. Mom didn’t remember anything about that evening, even on the drive home.

### **December 31, 2009**

We went to a friend’s house for a little New Year’s Eve celebration. It was very nice. Mom seemed to have a good time. She seemed to enjoy the pleasant conversation even though she didn’t contribute. We came home by 10:30 P.M.

### **January 1, 2010**

Mom picked out the black-eyed peas. Good soul food.

## *Deborah Keys*

**February 6, 2010**

This had been one of those difficult days.

I had become so very frustrated with my mother's disease. I hated her disease—*not* her. I loved *her* very much. No one was sweeter or kinder than my mother.

That sounds so selfish and petty, but it was how I felt. I was tired of not having my own house. Of not being able to live in my own house and have things my own way, the way I want them to be. I want to put things up and have them stay there, instead of her moving them or me having to move them so she won't break them or lose them.

She had broken so many of my things, many of them gifts from friends: a mantle clock that was a gift from precious friends, a flower vase I received as a retirement gift, a part of my dining table, the lid to my apple dishes sugar bowl, my Hawaiian beanbag doll—and she lost the lid to my favorite travel coffee mug. The list was endless.

She *never* remembered where the dishes went; where the drinking glasses were kept; which plates we used; where the silverware was kept or where to put it up; or where she sat at meals. When I got ready to prepare a meal, I had trouble finding the utensils I needed because she had put them in places that didn't make sense and were always the last places I thought to look. I had become very good at improvising and at hide-and-seek.