

# Caring for aging Mom transforms dutiful daughter

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**BLAIR GABLE FOR THE TORONTO STAR** Heather Menzies' *Entering Mourning: A Memoir on Death, Dementia, and Coming Home* recounts her experiences caring for her aging mother.

**Judy Steed**  
Special to the Star

There's a river running through the lives of middle-aged baby boomers, connecting them in the unceasing flow of aging – not their own, at this point, but their parents'. For many, it comes as a shock – the seemingly sudden shift to caregiver status.

Out in the real world, the conversations about "what to do about my mother," or, "what to do about Dad" are endless. Naturally: if we're in our 50s or 60s, they're in their 70s or 80s.

How significant is all this caregiving? It's huge. A recent study by Neena Chappell, Ph.D, professor of gerontology at the University of Victoria, and Marcus Hollander, Ph.D, a leading Canadian health-care analyst, states the estimated value of unpaid family caregivers looking after elders in 2009 is \$25 billion. Indeed, family caregivers are the single most important factor in health care for older people.

"Without them, no system in the world could function," says Toronto gerontologist Margaret MacAdam.

And everyone has a story – each as unique as the individuals involved. Some of us remain close to our parents as we mature, others become detached as we build careers and families and spread our wings. Some were never that intimately involved in the first place.

That's why Heather Menzies' experience with her mother is so startling. During childhood, Menzies, now 60, wasn't close to her remote, withholding mother, but during her mother's descent into dementia and death, Menzies was present, paid attention – and was reborn.

In *Enter Mourning: A Memoir on Death, Dementia & Coming Home* (Key Porter Books), Menzies recounts – in brilliant, vivid detail sometimes too excruciating to bear – her passage from being the "dutiful daughter," a role she describes as "my alibi, a mask of presence behind which I was essentially absent."

Painfully honest, she doesn't shy away from "the past, unresolved tensions still prickling like a wall of thorns between Mum and me."

That's when she got me – when she admitted the complexity of her feelings for her mother, and had the courage to stay the course, to follow her into the valley of the shadow of death. A scary place, but Menzies somehow sensed the value of fully engaging in "my own journey of unknowing, not just following Mum on her journey (into unknowing), but accompanying her, at her side. It's as though I had to live and feel each one of these losses, these blanking outs, these accumulated `deficits' in Mum's cognitive capacity, feel them as though they were falling away from me, too."

Not a place many of us want to be, but Menzies went there – while her marriage unravelled and her son encountered his own developmental difficulties. Reading the book, I expected her to completely collapse, but the opposite occurred. And, when I sat down with Menzies in Toronto recently, I saw it was true – she really had been transformed.

An adjunct professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, author of 10 books, including, *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*, Menzies is well known in literary and academic circles – but not for baring her soul. It was quite a departure, she admitted.

"I left home as early as I could, at 17, and it was only when my mother started to become frail that I got re-involved with her. My god, am I glad I did! What blocked me with my mother blocked me in my life, my relationships, my marriage. You have to deal with your issues. If you bury them, you bury yourself."

She couldn't be intimate "until I'd dealt with fears of intimacy related to my mother. It has been a huge gift to myself, to face up to this."

In the book, she describes the "dance of distance" between her mother and herself. "Me reaching out insatiably for her love and approval and her withholding it or doling it out sparingly, conditionally."

But as her mother failed in old age, and Menzies sat with her, cutting her nails, brushing her hair, rubbing lotion into her hands, her mother softened and finally, at the age of 85, told her 50-year-old daughter what Menzies had longed to hear all her life: that she loved her. Menzies needed that love spoken and felt – and she's not afraid to say so.

She also came to understand the origins of her mother's harshness: her own mother had died when she was 9, "and her father wasn't much use. She became a lost child."

And again, as an old woman, lost to dementia – along with one-third to one-half of the population who suffer from dementia in their 80s. (And are cared for primarily by female family members.)

Menzies charts, with exquisite insight, the loss of her mother's "personal narrative" as dementia claimed her mind. Her mother became "a displaced person, displaced from herself." She tried to hide it, as many do; she got lost driving; she needed her daughter to watch over her.

Menzies, one of four children, had to work with her siblings to arrange Health Care Directive and Medical Power of Attorney (substitute decision maker) documents. She says these are two of the most important documents families must discuss and make decisions about.

"Siblings have to agree," she says – and that can be a challenge. "There are many burdensome tasks that weigh you down; it's a source of stress. You may feel resentment; everyone handles the approach of death differently.

"Now we've all got aging parents," Menzies said. "I hope this book will help others pay attention and be present before it's too late. Inevitably, there's a falling away as parents age, they seem to recede into their frailty and it's easy to disconnect. The challenge is to stay connected, grieve the passing, be open to this frail person who is entering the state of dying. You gain courage, as you go."

[steadbooks@yahoo.com](mailto:steadbooks@yahoo.com)