

Mother's Narrow Road

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Early this year my mother moved into the Florida Baptist Retirement Center, across the road from the house where she had lived with my father until he died.

Geographically, the move covered about 200 yards. Emotionally, though, it spanned a lifetime. It's one thing to move a few pieces of furniture. Moving a lifetime of memories is another matter, however.

Watching her fuss over the little things as she moved, I became aware of the deep trauma going on in her life.

It was my friend Bill Lord, the director of the center, which is built, incidentally, on property donated by my father a number of years ago, who helped me sort through some of my own confusion.

In old age, he said, everything is accentuated to the extreme. The road narrows and those things younger folks see as pebbles become huge boulders in the path. To an old woman, living alone without transportation, the fear of running out of



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toilet paper, can become an obsession. A lost rubber band, a misplaced vitamin pill, a picture which hangs crooked—all demand immediate attention, regardless of what else is going on in the world. Just how big these obstacles are depends on the width of your road.

A few days after Mother settled in at the center she called long distance. It was 6:14 a.m. "I've been up all night looking for the big, white hat with the string you tie under your chin."

Jackie, who was still in bed, propped up on an elbow and whispered: "She told me to give it away."

"Mother, why do you need it?"

"They're having a big party here at the center and everyone has to wear a funny hat."

"When is the party?"

She hesitated. "Sometime this summer...I think." She sounded confused and lonely.

That afternoon Jackie and I drove the 40 miles down the coast to Vero Beach to try to solve the problem of the missing hat. After all, she changed my diapers when my road was even narrower, could I do less now?

We found a big *red* hat, which was even funnier than the white one, and she was happy.

On the surface, mother's preoccupation with things causes her to appear selfish. But until you are 86, alone, and your life is squeezed into one room with all your yesterdays hanging on one wall, it's not proper to draw conclusions.

You see, something happens in the autumn of life. As the leaves begin dropping from your tree, basic character traits are revealed. Stubbornness, humility, self-centeredness, generosity...old age doesn't change us, it merely reveals who we really are—what we have been becoming all these years.

Shortly after my father died, Jackie and I convinced Mother to buy a color TV. "There are a lot of good Christian programs," we said.

She agreed. We purchased a 19-inch Sears TV for \$400 and planned to take

it to Vero Beach on Friday and hook it up.

Friday at 6:00 a.m. the phone rang. "I've been awake all night worrying about that TV," she began. "You'll just have to take it back to the store. I just can't watch color TV when missionaries have so little. I'll be just as happy listening to the Christian station on my little radio."

I thought back to the summer Jackie and I married. We had tried to talk Mother into going to a Walt Disney movie with us.

"Your daddy and I have decided to give money to missions rather than go to the movies," she said.

Last week Jackie took her shopping. The next day she called. She had taken all her new clothes back for refunds—so she could send the money to missions.

For years I thought Mother was stingy. Not so. As she grows older I see her penny-pinching is simply a matter of priorities.

Yesterday I was sitting in my study in front of my word processor, surrounded with enough Apple software to run NASA, when my son called from Washington, DC. "Now is a good time to invest in a new issue of T-bills," he advised.

I told him I'd think about it. But after I hung up, all I could think of was my mother down there in the retirement center. I kept hearing her words from 30 years ago: "You can spend it on yourself now, or send it ahead by helping others in the Kingdom."

You see, I know some missionaries, too.

Even though she could have afforded it, Mother chose never to visit a mission field. Nor has she been to the Holy Land. It would cost money she could give to missions. She prefers to sit in her little room at the retirement center, praying for a number of missionaries by name and pinching pennies for the glory of God.

Her road may be narrow, but it goes all the way to the heart of God. ↗