

## ROLE REVERSAL HAS BENEFITS

by Jim Comer '66

Two years ago last month, at the age of 51, I became a parent for the first time. This was not a planned parenthood. I woke up in Los Angeles to a frantic call from my folks' next door neighbor, who said my father was wandering up and down the street. During the next few hours, he suffered a series of small strokes. Caring for my mother, who has early Alzheimer's, had taken its toll on his health.

As an only child, I instantly became the designated decision maker. For six months I

bring along a good book. Today I understand how waiting rooms got their name. On call day and night, I remind myself that patience is the currency of love.

Dad has made a remarkable—and unpredictable—recovery. At age 88, he now walks ten blocks a day. Both parents live in a retirement home instead of a care facility. Dad makes sure mother gets to meals and doesn't wander. As a result, he has regained his sense of purpose. He also keeps close tabs on the Dallas Cowboys (and rejoiced in the departure of Barry Switzer). Although I bought his Buick LeSabre eighteen months ago, he eyes it carefully each time I drive up. He noticed a missing hub cap before I did. He still tells me how to drive.

Our days together are both ordinary and

ordinary is fragile, but she still dazzles me with her wit. When told that a 90-year-old resident had praised her charms, she quipped, "Honey that's the kind I attract." Mom always wants to know if I'm working because she remembers when I was an actor and often wasn't. And she never fails to ask "How are you fixed for gas?" She probes relentlessly and *full tank* is the only acceptable answer. There is an up side to this prodding: I haven't run out in over a year.

Like Queen Elizabeth, mother never goes anywhere without her purse, and she spends much of her time inspecting its contents. I once asked why she needed it in the dining room. Looking at me with genuine surprise, she said, "A lady always carries her purse." Over the last year, I've learned to go into my mother's world. I no longer expect her to remain in mine. When she wants to visit her long dead sister in Smithville, I say, "We'll go next week." So far next week has never come. Despite dad's devotion and my best efforts, mother's universe is slowly shrinking. She no longer writes letters or makes phone calls. She asks me the same questions over and over. Sometimes I feel she's disappearing an inch at a time.

My view of life has changed immeasurably. I've discovered I have much in common with the engaging octogenarians who share my parents' lives. I see that dignity comes in a variety of shapes, including bent, wrinkled, and walker-assisted. I've learned there's no end to parenting—no vacation, no sick leave. I can't get on a plane and fly back to my life in LA—this is no cameo appearance. I am here for the long run.

Mother likes to tell people that Seton Hospital only charged her four dollars a day when I was born—and I'm worth every penny of it. I'll admit I didn't expect to be a retirement home regular at this stage of my life. There are, however, unexpected benefits: When someone asks how my parents are doing, I know the answer. I look at mirrors without flinching. And, as I walk into the lobby and see their eyes light up, I realize I'm in exactly the right place.

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*Jim Comer celebrates with his parents on the occasion of their fiftieth wedding anniversary.*

flew into Austin most weekends. I soon realized that I couldn't do what needed to be done from a distance of 1,300 miles. After a thirty-year absence, I quit my job, rented a U-Haul, and moved back to Texas.

Parenting my parents hasn't been easy. There are Medicare statements to decipher, hearing aids to adjust, and doctors' appointments to keep. Woody Allen says the most important thing in life is showing up. He should have added that you'd better

extraordinary. We have sorted through hundreds of boxes, donating truck loads to the local thrift shop. Although I persuaded him to get an ATM card, I have yet to persuade him to use it. Dad still surprises me with his enthusiasm. When I asked if he'd like to see *Titanic*, he called every morning at seven until I set a date for us to go. He loved the film but hated the drafty theater.

Mother busies herself watering plants on her floor, even the artificial ones. Her mem-