Our Parents’ Keepers
How to take the best care of the people who took care of you   BY CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI

AT A CERTAIN point in her forties, Paula Span noticed that the conversation among her friends had changed: it was less about growing toddlers, day care, and pediatricians, and more about aging parents, assisted living, and geriatricians. When Span lost her mother to cancer, the subject became even more pressing — she worried about how her father, now in his eighties, would cope on his own.

“It began to seem like my generation of baby boomers was coming up on this life-cycle event that few of us were prepared for,” says Span (COM’71).

A former reporter at the Washington Post and now a contributing writer for the Washington Post Magazine, Span spent two and a half years researching the topic and inter-

viewing subjects for a book she hopes will fill in the gaps. In When the Time Comes: Families with Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions (Springboard Press, 2009), she follows several families as they grapple with caregiving for elderly parents who can no longer live independently. “I wanted to encounter them when they were still facing the problem of what do we do about Mom, where should she live, what can we afford, how does she feel about it,” says Span, who also teaches journalism at Columbia University and writes The New Old Age blog for the New York Times Web site. “And I wanted to talk to the parents to see what they thought about making changes and how they determined which ones were acceptable and which weren’t.”

Span says her book is not a how-to manual, but rather a “survey of the landscape” as painted by the experiences of several families. “I’m just hoping that this is helpful and supportive and gives us a clue as to what lies ahead,” she says, “because there’s not a dress rehearsal for this.”

Span spoke with Bostonia about the families in her book, the decisions they made, and why The Waltons truly was fiction.

BOSTONIA: You spoke with adult children and their aging parents. What did your elderly subjects tell you?
SPAN: First of all, almost nobody wants to move. They want to stay in their homes or in the community, and that has consequences. One reason that the average stay in assisted living is fairly brief — twenty-seven months — is that people wait until they are quite frail and have multiple health problems before they do move.

So I learned that they want to live independently, they want to stay in their homes, not facilities, if they can, and they tend to move when something forces it: a fall, a health crisis. They don’t want their children dictating to them how to proceed, but they do take their advice seriously, at least in my very limited sample. It is a discussion.
You also found that they don’t necessarily want to move in with their children when they can no longer live alone.

I think we’ve all watched too many episodes of The Waltons. We envision a hazy golden past when generations lived together in mysterious harmony. And we berate ourselves because we think that we are too selfish or too geographically dispersed or too careerist or too feminist and that we don’t take care of our seniors the way we used to.

The direction over seventy years has been for elderly parents to not move in with their children as they used to. I found it really fascinating that two economists, one at Michigan and one now at Dartmouth, went through 100 years of census data and could pinpoint almost exactly when this historic shift happened: at the 1940 census, which is when the first Social Security checks were mailed out. And they controlled for many variables — was this because women were working? But it’s simple economics: as a nation, once we gave elderly people the financial ability to maintain their own households, they took it.

Assisted living sounds like a good option for elderly people who can’t manage on their own, but what are the limitations?

This was the great hope in the nineties, when the industry really mushroomed and overbuilt. It was a perfectly fine idea — it still is. But people move in when they are in their eighties, usually. They have multiple health problems. They’re taking multiple medications. They’ve stayed at home as long as they possibly could, so that by the time they’ve moved into assisted living, it’s probably wise to see it as more of a way station than as the last home that someone will need.

I still think assisted living is a good option, especially when it’s part of a continuing-care community, with an independent living component, assisted living, and maybe a nursing home. But it has limitations, and I think often families don’t realize that. At some point, if Mom is incontinent and can’t manage it herself, if her dementia increases, those kinds of things will lead to a discussion with the director of a facility, who will say, we can’t take care of your mother by ourselves any more. And then your choice is either hire aides in assisted living, which is a very expensive option, or a nursing home.

And nobody wants to live in a nursing home.

You sometimes hear children say, “I promised my mother I’d never put her in a nursing home.” But it’s not a promise that you can really make, because there can come a time when there is not a better option — unless you are an extremely wealthy person who can have home-care workers around the clock.

If your parent can no longer get out of bed and has to be turned every two hours to prevent bedsores, which are dangerous and painful, no single individual can be on the clock twenty-four hours a day. And at some point, having round-the-clock aides becomes an expense that most families can’t shoulder.

Plus, nursing homes are the only government safety net. The only government program that will pay for long-term care is Medicaid, which is meant for the poor. But it’s very simple for even a middle-class person to become poor, to spend down your assets, if you’re paying the average $7,000 a month for a nursing home. So you want to have the nursing home option, because for very sick people, where else can they go?

It sounds as though there is no single solution when it comes to caring for an aging parent.

That’s the reality. In the end, these decisions are highly individual and they change over time. And I think people have to make their peace with the fact that solutions are imperfect and they are not always long-lasting and everybody tends to grope through this period hoping for the best and doing the best they can. And sometimes that’s all you can do.