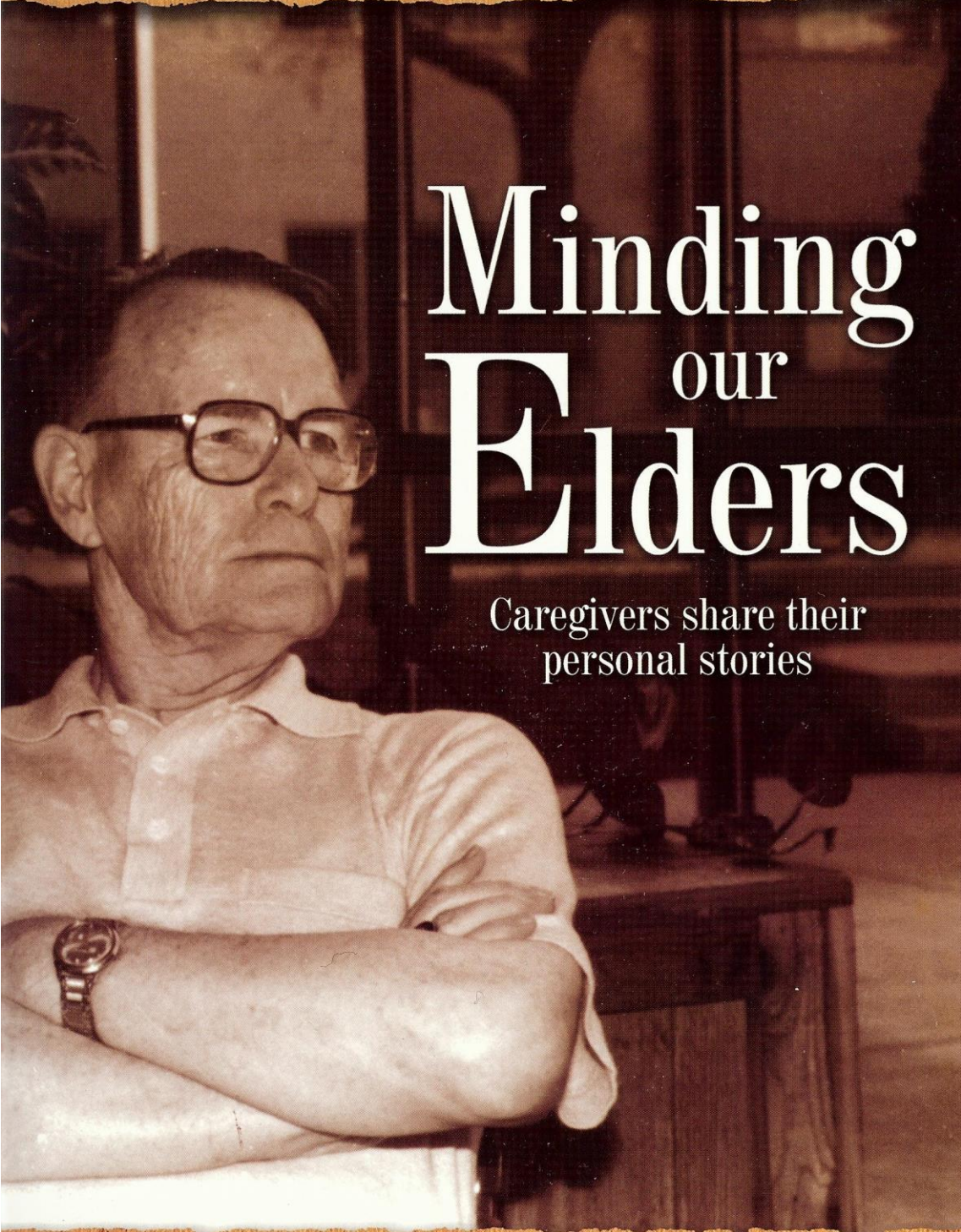


By Carol Bradley Bursack



Minding our Elders

Caregivers share their
personal stories

Foreword by Mary Ellen Erickson, Ph.D.

*Following is an excerpt from the book **Minding Our Elders: Caregivers Share Their Personal Stories**, by Carol Bradley Bursack. This is the story of the author's father, Clarence Little Bradley, whose brain was irredeemably altered by surgery that was meant to correct the effects of a World War II brain injury. Brad lived with severe dementia for ten years. He had indicated to Carol during lucid moments that he wanted his story known in case it would help others, which is one reason that Carol began writing about caregiving and dementia. He is still her champion.*

What Happened to Brad?

Dad was agitated. I could tell by his jerky movements, his flushed skin. He was perched on the edge of his lift chair, shuffling through a pile of papers on his knees, some of which were spilling onto the floor. A table on his left was covered with sticky folders and curled, spotted business papers. Three overstuffed brief cases and a file gaped open, more papers crouched under the sink and huddled under his chair. Juice-soaked business cards stuck to the wheeled table on his right, joined by his candy basket, call-light, tissues and boombox. He looked up hopefully as I walked into his room.

“Good. There you are,” he said. “I need you to...to...take some, uh, some, dic...oh...oh...some dictation.”

I caught a sigh before it escaped and replaced it with a smile and breezy attitude, as I kissed him hello.

“Sure. I can do that anytime. How are you?”

His eyes were red and unfocused, the look of his very delusional phase – as opposed to his somewhat delusional phase. My mission was to tame the tigers in his brain, so he can relax for a time.

“What I need is a list. The city commissioners. A list of them because of the elephants. I need you to write a...oh, a...a.. you know what I need, just write a...a...pro...pro....”

“A proposal?” I ask. “Sure, I can write a proposal. You want the commissioners to get an elephant for the city?”

“We’ve been working on it,” he answered. “But no! Not the...not the commissioners, but I’ve been working on... I’ve been asked... they’ve asked me to get an elephant and be a part....”

My brain searched for answers as it tried to separate the scrambled images Dad was relating. I got out the yellow legal pad he keeps by his chair and began taking dictation. His fingers are numb, and his eyes, ears, and brain are marginal, but tools for his work he must have.

“We are getting a new zoo, which is no longer a city project, but there is a zoo board. I’ll bet you’re working with *them* to bring in an elephant,” I said. I was beginning to feel the effect of endorphins, a feeling that I could go the distance this time. I wrote – *elephant*.

But then.

“And that Catholic prayer...the one that repeats...repeats...
Mary...something, bring me that. I need that.”

Considering our Presbyterian heritage, that was an unusual request, but, after six years of this, I am rarely surprised.

“Oh, you mean the Hail Mary?” I ask. “Hail Mary, full of Grace? The one they say for the Rosary?”

“Yes! Yes!” he answered, looking at me as if I truly had lost my mind this time. “Yes, why do you ask?” he said.

“Sure,” I said, grateful for the Catholic friends of my childhood, and my dear Catholic friend Jane, who taught me that prayer. Dad had raised exotic ants between the windows, kept bees (who wintered in our garage), dug for fossils, and scoped out the planets. In context, his need to bring an elephant to Fargo, or to have the words to a Catholic prayer, were mundane.

I wrote - *Hail Mary*.

“And the names of the commissioners, and their phone numbers and the addresses and where to put the elephant,” he said.

I wrote - *list commissioners*.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll have the zoo board contact you about the elephant, type up the Hail Mary, and get a list of commissioners. Will that do it?”

“I think so. Yes, good. Yes, that should be good,” he said.

His color improved, the agitation slowly drained away. My jaw relaxed and I breathed more easily as I realized that today I’d won. Just for today, I had quieted the chaos.

How to proceed in filling his needs for tomorrow? The Hail Mary, no problem, I know it and can type it out. The commissioners, no problem. In fact, I’ll get him the meeting notes off the Internet.

But the elephant and the zoo. A little challenge. I’ll have to write a letter from the zoo to Dad, thanking him for his interest, and inviting him to help them in the future when they are ready to bring in the elephant. Shouldn’t be too bad. Easier than the letter from the military thanking him for wanting to be an officer, or any of several letters from our mayor. I really should let Mr. Furness know about the letters he’s written Dad. Some other time.

Dad’s given name was Clarence, but he was always known as Brad. He was a retired city employee, growing old, a bit confused, but still Brad. Fluid had begun to build up in the scar tissue left behind from a closed head injury sustained during maneuvers in World War II. Dad, the skinny, fair fellow whose ancestors thrived in

cloudy England, collapsed while training in the Mojave Desert, smacking his head against desert rock. He was in a coma for weeks, then spent months in rehabilitation, learning to walk and talk. He fought through hell to lead a normal life, working, fathering two more children, earning a college degree, holding the position of supervising sanitarian for the city of Fargo.

But as he grew older the injury began to haunt him. His waterlogged thinking would grow worse if he didn't have a shunt put in his brain to channel off the fluid. Specialists recommended the operation.

Surgery day. As they wheeled him away, Dad forced a smile, thumb and forefinger creating a circle signaling "okay."

Hours later, we faced a sleepy man. We were filled with hope.

Days later we came to realize Brad had gone to sleep on that operating table and Clarence had awakened, firmly bonded with a voice in his head we came to call Herman. My dad, as I knew him, was dead. We were filled with despair.

Our family soldiered on. Since that time, I've created the degrees he thinks he's earned, designed the awards he thinks he's received, written the letters he thinks are coming. A few loyal friends still struggle to visit him, but the visits are so distressing that most stay away. Clarence is a bit frightening, and they want to remember Brad.

One morning, blood pressure and pulse barely there, he's Rip Van Winkle. Another morning, bright-eyed and mischievous, he's Dennis the Menace. He can be a great musician, a military officer, a doctor, lawyer, or president of the United States.

Dad was born prematurely in 1917. He's been hospitalized for pneumonia twice and nearly died from a penicillin reaction. He survived a closed head injury to claim the life God promised him.

So, what are a few elephants? I'll see what I can do.