

Assisted Living Bookshelf – Items for Your Perusal

Here, paraphrased slightly, is a description of aging from Mary Carlson, a geriatric psychologist, which provides a good point of departure for this report:

Aging is:

- being 60 and wondering what comes next;
- sensing the body's shifts of energy, momentum and efficiency;

Aging is a set of *wonderings*:

- about tomorrow's unknowns, about possible losses;
- about how long we will live;
- about whether we will be strong or vulnerable, shattered or intact, when we lose a partner, a job, or a life-style;
- about decisions and confrontations;
- about discipline – deciding between settling in or continuing to tackle life, doing exercises or giving up;
- about a set of big questions: *where to live*, whether to keep on working, whether to push limits or relax;
- about a set of daily life choices;

Aging is:

- like every other stage of life in many ways;
- different from every other stage of life in many ways.

(*Creative Aging*, pp. 136-7, emphasis added)

This report is concerned with one Wondering – the Big Question about *where to live*.

Narrowing it down, this report is only concerned with Assisted Living options – and narrowing further, only with those outside the context of Continuing Care Retirement Communities (which another WH committee will be reporting on).

Our little committee (Deirdre Cochran and Ellen Berg) will be offering several options for learning about Assisted Living – including this written report whose focus is on items one might peruse: books, written guides, and websites. There are many other resources, and we encourage others to add to this WH Bookshelf with brief reviews of ones you like.

Here we offer brief reviews of just 1 book, 1 written guide, and 1 website. We have found these useful, and we think they can orient you to what is out there. Each type of publication has its value and complements the others, and all of them augment what one learns from family, friends, and experts.

The Book: *When the Time Comes*

When the Time Comes; Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions. By Paula Span; Springboard Press 2009.

This book is written for children who “are stepping up” to help aging parents – but it is equally useful for older people themselves who are considering: Should I stay put or should I move? What are my options? What should I consider, ask, evaluate as I look around?

The chapters are: 1. Staying Put: Home Care; 2. Moving In: The Shared Household; 3. Moving On: Assisted Living; 4. What Else is There to Fear? Nursing Homes; 5. A Wedding and Two Funerals: Hospice Care.

Each chapter presents two case studies, chosen to illustrate a variety of medical, marital, extended family, and financial situations – as well as a variety of cognitive capacities, rational and irrational thoughts, values and feelings, and so on and on. At the end of each chapter there is a succinct page or two of questions to consider about the move you are considering – in this case to assisted living.

You will not find yourself exactly in this chapter, but because you find finely drawn portraits of two distinctive individuals you can be reassured that your own individuality is not about to be erased. The two are Mr. John Dutton and Mrs. Margaret Wunderlich – a man and a woman, he is well-off while she lives on social security, he has a son and she a daughter who both are loving but often absent. They share a deep anxiety about the cost of assisted living – underlaid, Span notes, by their experiences in the Depression and war years.

They both visit assisted living facilities they like – and, despite ambivalence Mr. Dutton moves in, while Mrs. Wunderlich does not. Their thought processes and emotional responses feel real thus can help open the reader to acknowledging her/his own. And the outcome – you can fairly decide either way – is permissive. No should or must here.

The chapter includes a section defining assisted living which begins with the assertion that “Assisted living is an idea defined largely by what it isn’t: It’s not a nursing home.” But it’s not your own home either – “it’s an in-between option” which serves elderly people who live with “chronic diseases, frailty, (or) extended periods of disability” especially well.

As for the ambiance, Span writes: “Certain design elements have become so standard in assisted living that people in the field joke about them – the gas fireplace and brass chandelier, the aviary housing parakeets or lovebirds, the gazebo. More significant, though, is what one doesn’t find: no long tiled, hospital-like corridors with nursing stations, no residents trailing IV poles, no PA system paging anyone.”

The “overall philosophy” of assisted living is “to provide personal care, 24-hour supervision and assistance, activities, and health services in a homelike setting.” It facilitates “aging in place,” and emphasizes “residents’ dignity, autonomy, privacy, independence, and safety.”

Span discusses the “inherent predicament” assisted living facilities face – over time an individual may go into decline. Other residents may complain, the facility may feel they can not meet the resident’s needs; Span lays out the options available at that point.

While the emphasis is on selecting the right option for yourself, Span points out that 40% of residents enter assisted living from a hospital or rehab center, and many more have cognitive impairments – so many “are in no condition to comparison shop.” In this kind of situation she suggests getting recommendations “from a geriatric care manager with long connections in the area (which is the best \$200 or \$300 you’ll ever spend).”

Finally, copied below are the questions she suggests you ask when the time comes to consider a move to assisted living. While written for children to consider (“Does your parent need...”), they are the same questions you might want to pose for yourself.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ABOUT ASSISTED LIVING:

Does your parent need help with housekeeping, meal preparation, and such activities of daily living as bathing, dressing, and remembering medications? Assisted living is primarily designed for seniors requiring this level of assistance.

Is she otherwise able to live comfortably in her own room or small apartment? Can she feed herself? Use a toilet or manage her own incontinence garments? If not, your parent may need more help and supervision than most assisted living residences provide.

Is she mobile enough, with a cane, walker, or wheelchair, to go to and from the dining room and to participate in activities and outings?

Does she require vigilant daily health monitoring (of blood glucose levels, for instance) or regular skilled nursing care? Most assisted living facilities don't provide such services, even if there is a nurse on the staff.

Can your parent or family afford steep monthly fees? In most cases, assisted living residents pay privately. But Medicaid will pay part of the tab in some states, and some facilities offer subsidized apartments; have you looked into such arrangements?

Can family members, trusted friends, or a geriatric care manager visit your parent weekly or more often, not only to spend time with her but to monitor her care? Can they come on varying days and at odd times?

Is your parent social enough to form relationships with staffers and friendships with fellow residents? Is she adaptable enough for a group residence?

From *When the Time Comes* by Paula Span; pp. 144-45

The Written Guide: *Retirement Connection*

Retirement Connection Guide is a free, advertiser supported resource guide for Puget Sound – serving King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties. The *Guide* is revised annually. The Retirement Connection company also has a website: www.RetirementConnection.com> This site has updated information as well as articles, and request forms for the free written guide. Amy Schmidt is the publisher, and her husband Lyman Schmidt is the editor. (Most of this review is based on the Apr. 2018-Mar. 2019 edition of the guide; the discussion of the grid for assisted housing is based on the Apr. 2019-Mar. 2020 edition.)

There is a letter from the publisher near the front of the guide which establishes a caring tone: “From our family to yours, thank you for picking up your copy of *Retirement Connection* and sharing this resource with your family and friends.” This intro continues with a nod to their “sponsors/advertisers” who support the written guide and website: “Please return the favor by contacting our sponsors when you encounter a need for their services and please tell them ‘I found you because of *Retirement Connection*.’”

The friendly tone established, and the pitch made, it’s down to business. The *Guide* is well organized and easy to use; to its credit, it does not plug the services of advertisers more than non-advertisers. That said, while there are many, many listings in the categories they cover, this guide is not exhaustive and should be used with other resources: other guides, websites, and the advice of family, friends, and experts.

The *Retirement Connection Guide* is organized into three color-coded sections:

1. *At Home Care and Health*
2. *Community Resources*
3. *Housing*

The third section is, of course, the one under review here, but it is important to note that the second section has useful resources for people considering and/or moving to assisted living. These include, but are not limited to, resources for: Care Management, Government Resources, Legal Aid and Resources, Medicaid, Medicare, Move Management, Real Estate Services, and Respite Care.

The *Housing* section begins with a couple of pages headed “Definitions.” These are meant to help you determine the type of housing which best fits your needs: Independent Living; Assisted Living and Adult Care Homes; Memory Care, and Skilled Nursing/Intermediate Care.

Once you are oriented, you can turn to the relevant “Grids” (aka spreadsheets) which array their listings of “Communities” (aka facilities).

The grid for Assisted Living and Adult Family Care Homes is one of two ways *Retirement Connection* offers information about such facilities, the other is via advertisements. While the grid is more objective, the ads are very helpful in orienting readers to the variety within the category. These may help you get the flavor of a specific place – but also, if you ignore the identifiers and just look at the text and accompanying photos, they may help you get a clearer sense of what is important to you. Here are some examples:

“Leave the worries to us and focus on what really matters...like showing off your grandkids!” Photo is of a man and 3 women looking at a photo – all white, all well coiffed.

“Be part of an entirely new ageless generation where age is just a number with less stress, more friends and more time to enjoy life!” Photo is of a group of 2 women and 3 men, laughing. White, black, Asian, and Hispanic.

“Elegant Living. Remarkable Care. Discover Assisted Living and Memory Care that creates daily comfort and convenience for your loved one and complete peace of mind for you.” Text with a tender mother-daughter photo.

“Simplify and live life to the fullest.” Photo is of a couple walking arm in arm, she with a cane; another man walking alone in the background – a sweater tied jauntily around his shoulders.

“It is different at the workers and owners really care. Medicaid friendly after 18 months of private pay.” Photo is of a woman at a card table, with others in the background; the place is modest and so is she.

These are just some of the ads – there are a few more with parents and children, with just men or with men alone. All these communities are in the Puget Sound region - yet every photo brims with sunshine!

The grid offers more objective information about assisted living in the Puget Sound region. Three kinds of care communities find their way onto the relevant grid: Assisted Living, Continuing Care, and Adult/Family Home communities. Each is fully and well described in the “Definitions” section. Critical attributes include:

1. Assisted Living facilities serve individuals needing some help with activities of daily life. These facilities offer an array services – some covered by a monthly fee along with rent, and others a la carte.
2. Continuing Care (or Life Plan) communities offer multiple levels of care, assuring residents that they can age in place. In addition to a monthly fee for services, these communities have a substantial entrance fee as well.
3. Adult Care Homes are licensed facilities offering care for up to six residents, usually in a large house. Note that there are just a very few of these on the grid.

The care communities listed on the grid are arranged by locale and include the following information arrayed in columns:

Name	Street Address	Telephone#	License Type	Bedroom or Studio	1 Bedroom or Larger
Kitchenette in Apt.	Nurse on Staff	Memory Care Onsite	Nursing Home Onsite	Respite	Care
Pets Allowed	Accepts Medicaid	Number of Units	Starting Price	Page Numbers	for Ads (where relevant)

While it is not exhaustive, the grid includes one or more facilities in each of sixty-one cities, from Aberdeen to Yelm. This long list of cities helps one think about options – while you may want to stay in your old neighborhood, it might be fun to have a change of scenery! More practically, it can also help one find a place convenient for frequent visitors, or near a specific medical facility.

All in all, we think that like the Yellow Pages of yore, this written guide is a useful tool when the time comes to find assisted living.

The Website: www.brookdale.com

Brookdale Senior Living, Inc. is a very large national senior living company – not surprisingly, it is one of three “featured sponsors” of the *Retirement Connection Guide* in which it advertises contact information for twenty-five communities in the Puget Sound area.

That said, we are not endorsing Brookdale Senior Living communities – just their website! It offers information which can help as you get oriented to assisted living options offered by any providers. We offer italicized reminders of this as we go along.

Reading left to right, their Homepage has drop-downs called Where to Begin, Our Services, and Brookdale Life.

Where to Begin: the sub-sections are Starting the Journey, Understanding Your Needs, Financial Planning, Finding the Right Option, Having the Conversation (within the family), and Making the Move. The text is often addressed to children, making decisions for/with their parents, but it is easy to adapt the ideas to your own situation.

This section is a reassuring one, addressing fears and emotions people have as they see changes in themselves or their family member. It also offers information on what kinds of changes matter, and what level of care is appropriate for meeting emerging needs. Brookdale promises in the section that “you are not alone,” they stand ready to help you understand your needs and options and to plan a solution. *We take this as a reminder that case management services are important – if you don’t want this service from a company which sells care, be aware that social workers attached to hospitals or independent social service agencies offer case management too.*

Our Services: the sub-sections are Assisted Living, Independent Living, Memory Care, Skilled Nursing, Hospice, Continuing Care, and Health Care Services. Each of these categories is defined succinctly in several places – for instance, in the sub-sections on Understanding Your Needs and Finding the Right Option one finds descriptions of Assisted Living, but those are greatly expanded upon in this part of the site, which can be found at: <https://www.brookdale.com/en/our-services/assisted-living.html>

The first item in this section is called Support That Seniors Can Count On. This is a reassuring introduction to what is a big decision – to enter assisted living. *The way Brookdale implicitly acknowledges that they are offering a philosophy of care, as well as real estate and services, is something you should be on the lookout for from any care community you consider.* They write:

“Give your loved one the opportunity to live comfortably and enjoy their own daily routine, with the confidence of safety and support through assisted living. We welcome you to a community where each resident is celebrated, cherished and connected....During this time of transition, we make every effort to ease your loved one into a comfortable and enjoyable lifestyle, offering individually tailored personal care options to perfectly suit their needs and preferences. Their plans, interests and goals are our priority, and we’re ready to do everything we can to help them live life to the fullest....From simple housekeeping and nutritious meals to hygiene and healthcare, we strive to enable our residents to lead their own lives in a way that keeps them happy, healthy and cared for....”

This intro is followed by a section answering 11 Common Questions about Assisted Living Communities. The questions are: What is an assisted living community? How is assisted living different from a nursing home? When is it time to move to assisted living? What is the cost of assisted living and does Medicare pay for it? What can a new resident bring with them when they move in? How big are the rooms – and can couples live together? Do residents need their own car? Are pets allowed? Can a senior be denied? What if a resident doesn’t remember to take their medications? How do I know whether residents are well taken care of? *These are good questions to ask anywhere you are looking – the answers here are Brookdale specific in some cases, but they can help you think about answers you are getting elsewhere.*

The next section, called Types of Care at an Assisted Living Community, includes segments on Expert Health Services, Personal Assistance, and Resort Lifestyle Services. This section is followed by another called What You Should Know About Assisted Living which reiterates some distinguishing features of this category – how it differs from nursing home care, that assistance is always available, and that Medicare does not pay for it.

The final section is Preparing Your Finances for Assisted Living. This is a light-weight section compared to the discussion of Financial Planning referenced in the Where to Begin drop-down. This latter includes an overview, and details relevant to each category of care community, including Assisted Living. They write:

“Assisted Living is the right choice for those who need assistance with daily living. What type of assistance? Getting dressed, managing medication, bathing, eating, and more. Brookdale will assess your needs and help you choose the services you need. With many floor plans and communities to choose from, you can have your care needs and lifestyle maintained all in one location. Included in the monthly rate are three meals each day, 24-hour assistance, activities, housekeeping, linen service, transportation, and apartment maintenance.” A chart with typical prices for assisted living follows. *You should get an answer such as this one from any care community you consider: what’s included, what’s extra, what the current prices for everything are, and even what to expect in terms of rising costs over time.*

The third drop-down menu is called Brookdale Life and includes these sub-sections: Signature Programs, A Day in the Life, Amenities, and Brookdale Blogs. This section offers insight into the company's view of aging and philosophy of caregiving. *By and large, we find what they write to be reflective of values in the field of aging which are in line with a recent culture change in the direction of resident centeredness – respecting that all living people have potential for growth and joy, that they need social connection and opportunities for usefulness, and that their environment must balance needs for autonomy and security.*

Again, we are not endorsing Brookdale – but suggest using their website as a guide to how you take the measure of the values and policies of all providers of residential care.

Signature Programs – This section begins: “Are you ready to live your best life? The kind of life where you feel physically strong, mentally sharp, and emotionally fulfilled....Well, our goal is to help you achieve that. Not on our terms, but yours. That's why we developed Optimum Life®. Optimum Life isn't a program—it's a foundation of how we approach wellness.”

Their approach to wellness focuses on six dimensions of life. They aim to help you optimize your Purpose, Emotional life, Physical status, Social connectedness, Spiritual well-being, and Intellectual interests. They have program offerings which foster growth in these dimensions.

Importantly, the site emphasizes their commitment to a resident-centered approach which they pointedly contrast to an older, top-down model: “Where traditionally you are offered a list of calendar activity options, we start first with getting to know you, so we can learn how you choose to live each day....” As far as practicable, you will be “empowered to live the life you want.”

This section on Brookdale Life also includes sub-sections called A Day in the Life, Amenities, and Brookdale Blogs. All can be used to help you assess what is important to you, and to measure what other providers offer (be it more or less). Their blogs are an especially useful resource, offering succinct articles in these categories: Alzheimer's & Dementia, Health & Wellness, Caregiver's Corner, Senior Living 101, Financing Your Future, Tech for Seniors, and Living with Purpose. Here's a link: <https://www.brookdale.com/en/brookdale-life/blogs.html>