

Beyond the grip of Alzheimer's

Even in the midst of Alzheimer's, we can find a glimmer of hope. Rob Parsons writes about his family's experience...

My mother-in-law, Anne, has **Alzheimer's disease**. When I visit her with my wife, Dianne, **I watch the interaction** between a mother and her daughter. As soon as Dianne enters the room, this old lady's **face lights up**. Such recognition used to prompt Dianne to say, "Do you remember my name?" But too **many disappointments** have stopped that question being asked. Instead Dianne will say, "You look pretty today" or "You've got your new cardigan on!" And again her mother will **smile with no less pleasure** than she did when as a young bride, her husband, long since dead, whispered in the church, "You look lovely!"

And then there will be some minutes where Anne just talks. It is true there will be **moments of clarity**, but for the most part it will be a jumble of gentle nonsense until Dianne interrupts and says, "What shall we do today?" In truth, Anne will **never leave her room again**, but one advantage of her confused mind is that almost anything is possible. And soon a mother and her daughter are planning a shopping trip.

"Shall we take the bus or go by car?" asks Dianne.

"Oh!" shrieks Anne, "the bus!"

"And what do we need to get?" says Dianne, reaching for a pen and paper. I smile as I watch an old lady, who once ran a large office, dictate a list so fast that Dianne (now her junior secretary!) can hardly keep up. But there is never a demand to see it all through – to catch the bus, to browse the shelves. It is as if, in her very heart, she knows. She knows that just as she played shops with the woman sitting beside her when that woman was a child, so now they are **playing the old game again**.

Change of roles

But it is not just mundane things like shopping that they do together. No – sometimes Dianne will **take her mother's hands** and say, "Let's dance!" And, in a moment, a bed has become a ballroom and Anne is twirling around a crowded dance floor with admirers who can only hope that the next waltz will be theirs.

And suddenly I know full well what is happening. It is all too apparent: apparent as the younger woman lifts the spoon to old lips, clear as day as Dianne wipes the food from the front of the new cardigan and fondles the face with the almost cheeky smile. Time has played its great trick and **the roles have changed**. The child is now the mother, and the mother the daughter

"Our Father..."

And so it goes on. And the child who was so often tucked in at night, now plumps the pillows and tucks the blankets around her mother. "Shall we say prayers before I go?" asks Dianne and begins the opening words of that ancient prayer. What happens next **never changes** and **never ceases to amaze me**. Old lips, that for the last hour could not speak half a dozen words together that made any sense, now recite word perfect every syllable: "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

It is as if deep in not just her mind, but her spirit, is a part that even the Alzheimer's cannot reach. And the **voice gets stronger** as **the prayer goes on** – right to the very last, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and forever. Amen."

Hope

Dianne and I sit in the car together outside and she cries. But **they are not tears of despair** because we both know what we have witnessed. It is as if an old lady has taken all the years of theology – of teaching that said, "In the twinkle of an eye we will all be changed, for the perishable will clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality..." – shaken the dust from it and said to us, "It is true – it is all true. There is a part of me that no disease, or even death, can rob me of. And one day you will visit me again and my face will light up when you walk into the room, but this time I will shout out loud, '**Dianne – it's you! Let's dance!**'"

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