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A Slow Ending or a Slow Opening

Introduction

There can be no doubt that there are those who will read this article whose lives at this time, even now, are being, have been or will be faced with dementia. I speak from experience because on December 30th 2022 my wife of almost 54 years let the door of earth shut behind her and entered the opened door of Heaven. At that moment she got her full faculties back. She had suffered from dementia for 15 years and for the last 4 years it was becoming clear that our days of being together were getting shorter. Her memory of me was fading and at times I asked, "Why is she so afflicted with such a disease, what lessons is the Lord seeking to teach me?"

I did learn patience for Jean would ask the same questions multiple times, and did not know how to use her spoon. I sat night after night feeding her like a baby with a teaspoon and never begrudging her the time or effort.

I learnt to feel pity for the folks in the home who were seldom visited. Some of them were lonely and knew they had been forgotten. So many had in earlier days times of laughter had been brides and had children. That was all now long past for now their days were spent in a wheelchair gazing out at nothing. At times I would wheel them to their rooms, sit with them, joke with them, and even sing to them. Then, slowly one would see the smile come to an old wrinkled face and again, if only for a moment, they were young again.

I also learnt that God is very considerate. Jean's condition declined badly on December 20th and I asked the Lord to kindly not let her die at Christmas. In His mercy, she lived and I gave her her last Christmas gift. Then on December 30th, Jean was released from this vale of tears. God answered my prayer.

I learnt the following matters and write them, hoping they will help others who are caregivers.

What a caregiver must do.

Caregivers must never fail to look after themselves.

- a) The caregiver must care for him or herself physically, emotionally and most of all spiritually. The path being trodden is a rollercoaster of emotions whether it is anticipatory grief, guilt, or failure in recognizing the symptoms or how one reacted due to them. Caring for oneself is not selfishness but wisdom.
- b) The caregiver, perhaps unwittingly, is under a lot of stress. Life is not as it was, for apart from the frustration of dealing with an individual who is losing their ability to comprehend, there is the change of lifestyle.
- c) When having to place a loved one in a care home there can be the feeling of guilt, failure, and at times anger from the individual for they do not understand it is for their benefit. When I saw how well off Jean was in the care home, I saw how kind it was to have her cared for by professional help. It helped greatly.

There will be multiple times when "white lies" will need to be told for the suffering one does not understand. My wife loved chocolate which I supplied for her every day. However, there were times when she would not take her medicine or eat her food then I would say "chocolate" and she would eat it.

What are some of the symptoms?

Not being a physician I can only tell of the symptoms I saw in my wife. Looking back I wonder how I could have missed some of them, but I had never walked that path before.

- a) Jean began not to know the front of a letter from the back or if it was upside down.
- b) In time she began to lose track of where she was even though we lived there for 35 years.
- c) She began to lose any idea of time and was unable to read the time.
- d) There was short-term memory loss and Jean thought she was 40 when in her mid 70's.
- e) There began to be trouble communicating what she was trying to say.
- f) There were hallucinations.
- g) Massive mood swings, laughing one second and a couple of seconds later shouting.

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- h) She would take paper and tear it up, mesmerized with the little pieces, or spin the toilet paper until it was all over the floor but would deny she did it or explain how it happened.
- i) If I tried to reason with Jean to put on a warm coat in the fall, she did not want it. I would then ask, "Can you help me to put this on you?" It allows them their independence which keeps their spirit up. It stops them from thinking, "I'm useless".
- j) I learned to speak softly and slowly for her mind could not quickly process that which is being said.
- k) There is no value in debating or rationalizing with them. In time I learned to agree with whatever she said.

When they want something they will find a way to get it. Never underestimate them.

One of the things learnt is that they know how to play you. Jean could hardly get into bed on her own and I had to help her, yet, when the health care worker whom she did not like came, Jean could move like lightning and get into the bed pretending to be asleep before I could get up the stairs. If they want something they will find a way to get it. For instance, my mother wanted out of the home in Belfast but the doors were locked. However, she watched when the staff would go out one of the unlocked sliding doors in the family room. One day mother decided she had had enough and went out for a walk on a chilly winter day in her nightgown.

Knowing a little bit about what would I change or still do.

Each day I would comb or brush Jean's hair and put coconut oil on her face and hands. I would give her four kisses, one on each cheek, one on her forehead and one on her lips. It was our greeting. The girls in the home were always very good to me. When ready to get Jean ready for the night they would give me time to kiss her hug her and tell her "I love you". Those are things I relish. I took hundreds of still pictures and many videos of her, things which I cherish now. Today as I watch them, I can see her cheeky face at times, us talking together and just enjoying again the wonderful times we had together.

What did I learn?

- 1) I learned that service for God does not depend on life's duration. For the last four years of Jean's life, she could do nothing, not read her bible, not pray nor sing, nor witness. When there is deducted the years before she was saved and those when she was afflicted, more than 20 years were zero in her conscious service to God.
- 2) I learned that God is in control of our life's duration. In May of 2021, Jean had a stroke and it was thought she was soon to die but the Lord restored her. Then March/April 2022 she had another stroke. I recall, on my knees by her bed, breaking my heart as the head nurse told me that she would soon be leaving us. She came back from it. Then on Tuesday, December 2022, I got a call, Jean had another stroke. A few days later the Lord released her.

What was happening in those years?

The door to heaven's glories began to open very slowly away back in 2007. Almost imperceptible it began to open. Then as brain cells began to die more quickly, the door was opening wider until at 3:03 am on Friday 30th December 2022 the door swung wide open. Life here on this sphere ended and Jean heard the voice of her beloved say, "Rise up my loved one and come away for the winter is past and the time of singing has come". At that moment Jean walked with the Lord into that land of endless bliss. I wonder what was it like for her to see the Lord, to see the print of the nails, and with Him enjoy the fullness of divine life. Her new life had begun for we read, "They before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sunlight on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes (Rev. 7:15-17).

. . . . Rowan Jennings