

Highly Commended = Kerry Osborne (NSW)

Bringing In the Light

Today I sat beside Mum at her nursing home Christmas party, my hand resting on her arm, connecting us now that the words have gone. Tinsel and lights decorated a room full of men and women living out their final months. My Mum spends her days in her green water-chair, in quiet acceptance, gazing at those who pass by with wise and wistful eyes.

The last time I had a normal conversation with Mum was four years ago, when we were driving to a local park. Sleep deprived and irritable, I listened as Mum told me about Dad's memory loss and erratic behaviour, and how she wasn't coping. She was reluctantly taking antidepressants for the first time. Even now, I can recall my rising annoyance at her words. I resented the neediness, and longed for a mother who could support me. Just before we got out of the car, she looked at me and said: "*Don't you know what it's like to be depressed?*" I didn't know what to say, so I snapped at her and hastily unstrapped my son from his car seat. We went on to join my sister and I watched Mum play on the slippery dip and swings with my three-year-old toddler. She lit up when she was with the kids and behaved like a kid herself.

Shortly after, we went for a walk. As we crossed a bridge, Mum began repeating the same sentence and jerking her head to one side. We were puzzled. Mum then fell to the ground, her body convulsing in a seizure. This was our first hint that a tumour was growing in her brain.

Surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy followed, and I never had the opportunity to finish that conversation. The tumour affected her ability to speak and, in time, took away most of her movement. Mum was depressed and had needed my understanding, but I had brushed her off. If a friend had spoken to me about their depression, I would have listened. But women of my mother's generation – and my mother in particular – weren't supposed to get depressed. I needed her to carry on living quietly and self-sufficiently, so she could be there for me.

Dad had indeed been acting strangely, and at the same time Mum was diagnosed with a brain tumour, he was declining rapidly with vascular dementia. As a highly intelligent man, the diagnosis of dementia was devastating. Depression played a major role in his condition, too. He was prescribed antidepressants and antipsychotic medication to try to control his moods. He was initially admitted to a psychiatric hospital rather than an aged care facility. But most distressing of all was the fact that Dad's superior intelligence left him fully aware of his plight.

When illness hits in later life, the coping mechanisms are stolen. Strong, independent and intelligent people are faced for the first time with a lack of control and a vast ocean of loss, grief and confusion.

Throughout her life, Mum managed her emotions by keeping active and enjoying a busy social life. Every morning she did aerobics and every evening she went for a walk. She was an accomplished seamstress and line dancer. Exercise and keeping busy kept her afloat.

Dad found joy in his work. Even after retirement, he started his own consultancy business and was busier than ever. His free-spirited mind was in constant motion – devising, crafting and dreaming.

There was a period when I could not accept that my parents were slipping. I needed them to remain my nurturers. I recall a dream I had about Dad, which is a picture of my denial. In my dream I was a young girl

again, living at home, and Dad was driving me to an appointment. He was the vibrant, strong and confident man I knew. Dad cursed as he slowed behind a small late-model blue car that was meandering across the road from one side to the other.

As I looked at the blue car, I caught my breath when I saw my Dad behind the wheel. This time he had grey hair, a thin wrinkled face, and his hands were feeble, struggling to hold the steering wheel. He had lost his direction and was beginning to panic. Inside I felt a wave of terror rise to my throat as I saw Dad veer off the road and drive across an oval. My younger Dad beside me mumbled “*Bloody idiot, where’s he going?*” The blue car was heading toward a cliff. I was screaming. The car plummeted over the cliff and I watched it spin before it crashed to the ground amid plumes of dust and smoke. However, rather than running to try to save him, I turned my head away. I willed our car to drive away so I didn’t have to face the damage at the bottom of that hill. I turned to my strong father beside me for comfort, the tears streaming down my face now, but he melted away and vanished. I was alone. I awoke in desolation, and I knew from that day that I had lost my Dad.

Immediately after my dream, Dad deteriorated further and went into care, until he passed away last year. The last few years for Dad were torture. He was faced with an existence devoid of all the things he held dear – his mind, his freedom and his dignity.

So what is the solution? How do family members and carers of the elderly who are faced with illness and the accompanying depression offer the support that is needed?

The turning point for me was when I accepted that in many ways my parents’ situations were without easy solutions and I couldn’t fix them. But I also couldn’t deny and abandon them. I realised it was time for me to grow up and understand that our roles had reversed. I accepted the darkness of their plight. One day a thought jumped out at me as I struggled through a visit with Mum, “*You need to bring light into the darkness*”. I wondered how I could do this.

On the next visit I took along some books and read Mum some psalms and poetry. Her moaning ceased and she calmed. I could see that she could hear the enriching words and her thirsty soul was nourished by them. The surroundings were just as unappealing but the atmosphere shifted as my quivering words rang out: ‘*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*’

I now regularly arrive for my weekly visit armed with bright fresh flowers, funny stories about the kids, chocolate cake and French perfume – little snippets of being alive in a place that is punctuated by death.

I believe that those of us caring for family members with late onset depression and illness can bring our unique light into the situation. It is amazing what we humans can cope with and grow into. In the past few years I’ve focused less on myself, and have drawn deeply on my spirituality and faith in God. I’ve learnt to never give up in the fight to improve the quality of life of my loved one. You can be an advocate and fight for them to receive the compassionate care that they deserve. You can bring life to them, even if it is only a milkshake or a mango.

As a society we need to develop an awareness that old age can make you invisible. I’ve experienced this in hospitals and aged care facilities. Add to age, terminal illness and depression, and you will find that the person is often ignored or abused. How many are left alone in their suffering? Perhaps it is fear or perhaps it is ignorance, but I feel we need to be educated as a community on the needs of the elderly so they receive the respect and support they so richly deserve.

Although Mum is physically poor, emotionally she is thriving now and I am so proud to watch her overcome many of her 'demons'. Her period of intense depression was heart wrenching to watch, yet she has now found a place of peace and acceptance. Our relationship has also been healed and restored and we've learnt to communicate again.

The most important lesson I've learnt is the power of love and the gift of being valued. As a family member, you can show your loved one that you still love them, despite everything. Nothing can take that away from you, or them.