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The Golden Touch



By William Peniston, MD

I WAS MY WIFE'S CAREGIVER for about four years as she declined with dementia. My daughters and I believe she probably had some very early signs during the year before our 50th wedding anniversary, but it wasn't until about five years later that a brain scan showed evidence of a silent stroke.

We were told this was the beginning of multivascular dementia. Her course would probably be familiar to most readers, although every person with dementia is unique in how they manifest their disease.

Equally critical in this situation is the reaction of the demented patient's caregiver. It took me a good many months to learn that I was not as patient as I had thought; that the repeated questions and nagging were causing a gradually rising level of annoyance and increasingly frequent episodes of anger.

Those emotions led to deeper and more frequent feelings of guilt and self-dislike. So much so that, as time progressed, I began to realize that I was not the strong, silent type I had thought but desperately needed help.

As I wondered where to turn I thought of our neurologist, one of the few really "amiable" physicians I know. And what a lucky thought that was! He recommended Del Oro Caregiver's Resource Center which quickly resulted in a one hour interview and a very pleasant and understanding young lady (young enough to be my granddaughter) who advised me to attend a monthly Del Oro meeting of men with similar problems.

She was the facilitator for the group, and I quickly learned that I was far from unique in my response to my wife's illness. I also learned that Del Oro hosted, frequently in association with the Alzheimer's Association and similar groups, public presentations regarding the evaluation, course, treatment, and care of persons with dementia. Additionally, Del Oro was able to provide me with brief episodes of respite care for my wife as well as help in finding someone I could hire for help with my wife's care.

Yet there still remained a low grade but persistent and depressing anger toward my wife and myself. After several months at the group's meetings, our facilitator apparently sensed this and suggested I might wish to accept Del Oro's offer of six psychotherapy sessions at no cost. Having undergone four years of psychoanalysis as a young man because of panic attacks, diagnosed as "anxiety neurosis" in those days, I readily accepted the offer - and my life changed.

After completing the six sessions, I realized I needed much more. Luckily, I bonded well with the therapist, and we soon learned that although the psychoanalysis superficially resolved the panic attacks it never really addressed the root causes. One fundamental thing that "talk" therapy helped me recognize was that I never was the strong, silent, patient type like my father was. I had spent my life trying to imitate him. (I suspect that's why I chose surgery over family practice.) I also learned I had problems of a more basic and long term nature that were important in my responses to my wife's illness. So I settled down to some basic "talk" therapy that I may continue indefinitely.

During that therapy I learned about the childhood experiences that had led to my confusion about love and self worth, and how that confusion was affecting my current feelings about myself and my wife. As a result, I gradually stopped disliking myself and began to love my wife again.

As her illness progressed I was able to recognize when it became necessary to place her in a care facility. Although I liked to think this was primarily for the physical aspects of her care, there is no question that my psyche also benefited. Following the change, my emotional healing continued in an erratic and progressive manner.

Despite the sadness of the gradual slipping away of my life's partner's persona, I was somehow able to tolerate it. I knew the ending would be close to intolerable, and it was. But because of Del Oro I was able to deal with it in a manner acceptable to myself. I'm thankful for all they did for me.

As I look back on life I recognize that the worst thing that ever happened to me was my wife's developing dementia. Even so, this was followed by one of the best things, my finding Del Oro and the psychotherapy that has changed me for the better.

willpen@mcn.org