

## **“A Different Affair of the Heart”**

Dementia caregivers all report the same message. Loosing that thread of connection with the person with dementia seems to be the hardest part of any day. It does not matter what disease or trauma created the dementia. While there are many conditions that can produce dementia, the ones most common to all of us include not only Alzheimer’s disease but Lewy Body dementia, Fronto-temporal lobe dementia, chemo brain, strokes and the traumatic brain injuries like the ones seen in returning war veterans and/or prominent sports figures. Reading about any one of them can be exhausting. Becoming knowledgeable about the most prevalent ones is draining. Living with any one of them is life altering.

Although someone’s brain cells have been altered by a disease or traumatic event, it does not have to mean that all avenues of communication are lost. There are many other pathways to the afflicted person’s inside world – to his/her heart and soul. These pathways or doorways are simple to access and easy to open.

When people understand that the human heart is actually a larger organ of communication than the brain, they will begin to understand just how *easy* it is to stay connected. The heart is laced with many nerves and neurochemicals that carry impulses or messages to the brain and back.

What must change for caregivers - and those who want to interact with a person with dementia – are the expectations one has for a response from the person with dementia. In some instances, the response will be immediate and very profound. The You-Tube video of Henry with his MP3 head phones in place listening to some *1920’s jazz* is just one example. The smile on his face is a joy to see. In other instances, the response will appear to be more subtle or nothing at all. A smile may appear on the dementia person’s face when a child walks up to him/her. Beautiful paintings may emerge from the person with dementia who has never painted before someone put a paintbrush in that idle hand. Signs of agitation in the person with dementia may disappear and a wave of calm may sweep over the room as jokes are being told and people in the room begin to laugh. Who would ever believe that laughter could calm a room filled with

agitated people. In every instance “faith of the heart” is required – faith that one heart will touch another in some way.

As one heart opens to another, a new type of communication begins to take place. This is one of the many “gifts of dementia” that can be realized by those who are willing to embrace this growing phenomena in our world. There are many other “gifts” available to anyone who is willing to listen.

Rather than bemoaning the devastating losses that come with many types of dementia, we need to *celebrate the gifts that remain* and the opportunities that come with those gifts. Some dementias are limited in the scope of permanent damage that may exist. Others will be progressive in nature and take a toll on all of relationships that remain over time. One can leave those doorways closed and engage in protracted periods of grieving for weeks, months or years until the person with dementia has left this world for another. Another option is to acknowledge the losses that come with the dementia, grieve them, let them go, move on and begin to celebrate those assets that remain. Find ways to stay connected. Each person is unique. Find doorways that specific to that person’s life. Be prepared to have your relationship transformed.

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