Make Hay While the Sun Shines

She and I had endured what seemed like an excruciating, unnecessarily long period of diagnostic frustration, awaiting some answers—any answers—to what was plaguing her. Brief lapses in recent memory. Losing her keys—shoot, I'd done that myself more than once. Mild disorganization, leaving bedroom and bathroom lights on—me too—but this was way out of character for the highly organized woman I had known and loved for over 12 years.

Now the results of her visit to the neuropsychologist had been relayed to her neurologist who in turn would pass on the stinging news to us.

"It's TIAs, isn't it?" the anxious physician within me asked hopefully.

The doctor shook his head slowly, quietly but surely. Then he explained that my wife had Alzheimer's disease or, as he then diplomatically shortened it, "AD." She has early onset Alzheimer's disease, first symptomatic when she was only 62, an age when very few in the general population are so unfairly stricken.

Before we left his office, he wrote her a prescription for Ebixa, one of the four or five medicines that help slow but not stop the progress of this relentlessly cruel and pitiless memory-killer. As we drove back to our home on Vancouver's north shore, she began quietly crying. "Do you want to share?" I asked at a stoplight.

"Well . . . you've been through this before!" she observed, referring to the death of my first wife.

"Well . . . so have you, honey!" I said, reminding her that she too had lost a partner, her husband to pancreatic cancer, before mutual friends introduced us. We were mostly quiet as we drove the rest of the way home, our private, probably overlapping thoughts, fears and fantasies swirling in our respective heads.

Later I silently mused over the recent stories in the media reporting the challenges that the many families now living with Alzheimer's disease were facing. But most of these focused on the difficulties facing individuals looking after parents struggling with this progressive dementia. Only a very few acknowledged the trials experienced by husbands and wives now caring for their similarly afflicted spouses, some at home, some in nursing homes and some probably in periods of change difficult for both partners. My wife insisted we see the movie ***Away from Her***, starring Julie Christie and Gordon Pinsent and highlighting this time of transition. We laughed. We cried. Afterward we shared our feelings softly while enjoying East Indian food.

Today she is at home with me, and me with her. And we both hope it stays that way for a long, long time. There are many challenges, however, and also opportunities in this newest phase of our marriage and personal lives. A gifted, tough-minded but warm psychologist overseeing four mental health clinics in British Columbia, she has been forced to shut down her own clinical practice. A large part of her identity has been her work with the many clients that she has helped over the years and the associated rewards of appreciation of those she has helped, the quality psychotherapy hours she has overseen, and knowing at the end of the day that she has indeed made a difference. The loss of her practice has therefore come as a huge blow to her pride and self-esteem, her sense of being a more-than-competent mental health professional and person.

While waiting for the results of a second opinion in a phone conference that would confirm the original neuropsychological testing, she impatiently swatted away my hand meant to comfort . . . her? Me? Probably both of us. Though often frustrated and discouraged, she refuses to feel sorry for herself.

As for me, I have learned that I can make two types of mistakes in our daily to-and-fro and give-and-take. The first kind is the anxious husband reaching out to help his wife when she

neither needs nor wants assistance. The second type of error sees me missing an opportunity to help her when she genuinely needs it. Type 1 errors are more common and really tee her off. Type 2 errors are mercifully less frequent, or so she says.

I comfort her when she's having a bad day, feeling irritated or frustrated. And sometimes I feel cheered up myself, reassured and relieved in being able to be there for her. Most days we enjoy each other and sometimes, hugely. Laughing. Fighting. Making up. Making love. Teasing and joking. Snuggling. Enjoying her superb rhubarb crisp. So just as in the time before Alzheimer's disease came into our lives, on our very best days we live contentedly in the moment, in the here-and-now.

And after all, isn't that all that any of us do and experience on a good day with those who count? We must enjoy our family and friends while we have them. Alzheimer's disease is just an unkind, uninvited and unwelcome stranger in our midst, a reminder of that secret, that recipe that is there for any of us—heck, all of us—to take pleasure in. We don't have to wait until Alzheimer's comes rudely visiting before we enjoy our wife or husband or partner, other family or friends; before we appreciate—and acknowledge—how much they mean to us.

My grandmother said it better than ever I could have. "Make hay while the sun shines!" she would remind me today.

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