

**Making Sense
Out of Bioethics**
Seeking the Spiritual Side of Dementia

Fr. Tad Pacholczyk

The possibility of suffering from dementia later in life is a worrisome and unpleasant prospect for many of us. Most people I know would like to remain in possession of their mental faculties until the end. Stephen Post, Director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at Stonybrook University describes it this way:

“The leading symptoms of dementia are, frankly, terrifying: loss of memory, of language, and of reasoning ability. We all feel at least a slight anxiety about dementia because these dreaded symptoms seem to assault our very identities, to dissolve the autobiographical narratives that constitute the very story of our lives.”

The dreaded symptoms of dementia may lead to spiritual temptations. The prospect of losing autonomy and control can lead some to despair and even attempt suicide.

What can we say about the meaning of a life-changing reality like dementia for ourselves and our loved ones? Could it be that God is seeking to carry out a particular spiritual work?

For some who face dementia, it can have the effect of getting them off the treadmill and detaching them from those aspects of their lives that may be binding them, whether it's work and career, hobbies or pastimes, or something else that may be drawing them away from a needed spiritual focus.

In one of his articles, Stephen Post mentions Peter, who through his struggle with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's, experienced a spiritual reawakening and encountered the Lord's grace:

“I'd say, 'Why did you let this happen to me? I had such a good career. Everything was going fine for me.' He would say to me probably, 'Well, why did you fight it? I was trying to lead you in this direction.' Oh, I didn't realize that. Well, I've come to the conclusion that everything has a purpose, so the Good Lord, He knows the best for you. So maybe this was to slow me down to enjoy life and to enjoy my family and to enjoy what's out there. And right now, I can say that I'm a better person for it, in appreciation of other people's needs and illnesses, than I ever was when I was working that rat race back and forth day to day.”

It can be very hard for a family, especially a spouse, to watch the slow destruction of a loved one's faculties. At times the person suffering from dementia can become so frustrated they are aggressive towards those around them. There is need for a great deal of patience and spiritual and social support in these situations.

The lives of caregivers tend to be upended and changed profoundly by caring for a family member, relative or friend with dementia, and the generous love they share is itself often sustained by faith in God. As caregivers watch their loved ones with “deep forgetfulness” disengage from the people around them, and from other previously important reference points in their lives, they also witness the emergence of an unmistakable simplicity in those they care for.

In a 2010 essay, Mary Anne Moresco beautifully sums up her dad's and her family's transformative spiritual journey this way:

“My 83-year-old father has dementia. He can remember things that happened a lifetime ago like it was yesterday, but he often can't remember yesterday at all... My father needs this time in life. And we, his children, need it too. We need to glimpse into his past days, as he journeys backward. We need to show him love, as best as we can. We need to offer up our prayers for him. This time is useful. It is valuable. For everything there is a season, and this winter season of my father's life is part of what will help guide his soul into eternity. Dad, through his dementia is working out his salvation. He isn't doing that the way his children wanted him to do it. He isn't doing that the way he wanted to do it. He is doing it the way God has deemed that he must do it. '...unless you become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' (Matt: 18:3)... With each passing month, my father grows more humble and more childlike, more dependent and more trusting and I do not doubt, closer to our Lord and to Heaven.”

As the symptoms and complications of dementia unfold, the challenges we face from the disease can unexpectedly become an invitation from God. Although dementia can contribute to spiritual growth, it almost always involves a great deal of suffering for all concerned, and the challenges should not be underestimated. Such moments, nevertheless, offer important opportunities to grow in grace, to slow down, to reevaluate our priorities and to enter into a more profound relationship with Him who is our final destination and abiding hope.

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