



DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

Who would ever be prepared to watch someone you love—a respected teacher, an educated scholar begin the long slow road into dementia? The painful looks, the unknown glance, the often asked questions—the threat of losing one's way—all part of the journey.

I recently spent 3 days with my parents, 86 and 88. Mom, 86, frail and feeble but quick witted and clear of mind. Dad, 88, spry, wiry, eager. A helpful Southern gentleman with advanced dementia but remembers daily to meet the rural mail carrier with the same question, "Do you have time for me to get you a coke?" Each day the reply is "I sure do." and off Dad scoots to return with a coke and a box of vanilla wafers

My Dad is really a puzzle. He is a retired Southern Baptist Minister with a doctorate in Old Testament studies. He pastored a church in a small Southern town for 25 years and in metropolitan DC for ten years, plus all sorts of other churches, small and medium size while he was in seminary and graduate school. He is a Bible Scholar extraordinaire—reads the Bible every day and has read it through numerous times. Can quote scripture, remembers the lines of David's sons in the succession of things, is intimate with the *Tribes of Israel* and can teach the book of *Revelation* with his vision of the Second Coming. And, yet he gets mixed up making change at the checkout counter when he buys a \$2.49 battery for his hearing aid.

He has always been very fastidious with his person: pressed shirts, clean shoes, and remembers black socks when you put on your "dress shoes." And, he asks the same questions regarding the plans for lunch at least 25 times in succession. It is almost as if his journey into dementia is a very slow bug or virus which is steadily working its way with insidious precision in his brain. He still drives with mother providing the directions. He is very helpful around the house even doing many things he never did when we were young. Looks after the trash and pays his bills. He writes checks but is unclear on the dates.



I have grown to love this person my Dad has become even more than I could have imagined. I see poignant vulnerability which quickens the pain in my heart. It's an awareness that what the Psalmist promised, "Old age is a crown of glory" is not coming true for my Dad. He loves to go to Church. He rides and delivers mobile meals every Tuesday to a rural route for fifteen people. He prays beautifully at family suppers. And, he looks at you at times with a look of total unknowing—"Who are you?" is always unspoken and palpably charged.

In his altered state, my Dad has not lost the beautiful qualities of being a Southern Gentleman, he stands whenever a woman enters the room and offers his seat. He speaks to

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little children at church. He carries my mother's purse as she walks with a cane. He opens the doors for women and wants to help me with my suitcase. "Do you need anything, Jackie?" he asks each night as I head off to bed. I run each morning and my Dad tells me every night how to get to the track.

The most hurtful moment comes when you are aware that he is aware that he's "not quite with it." That moment—what would you give to have your Dad never experience that moment? jca

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