

Sometimes can often be enough

Pete & Shelley Aarssen - May 2022

We recently celebrated Easter in our faith tradition, we still do; for 50 straight days! But on what is commonly referred to by most everyone as Easter Sunday, we visited Shelley's dad in the long-term care facility where he now lives. Dad has dementia and he suffers from Parkinson's disease as well. Living into his late 80s now, we are very happy that he remains among us.

While the quality of the conversations we have together narrows a bit each year, we have found him able to share in and express laughter at many of our peculiar family happenings. The thing is that on some days, he doesn't even know who we are. We know that it's not his fault but due to the consequences of the conditions that he is afflicted with.

Yet, on Easter Sunday, he knew us! As we sat down to visit with him, we quickly heard that warm and familiar greeting as he stared our way; 'So how's Pete'?

According to the Canadian Alzheimer Society, more than 500,000 Canadians struggle with dementia today; a number that is projected to nearly double by 2030! The society compiles other statistics that can help frame the gravity of impact dementia is having on individual families and on society. Already one in five Canadians has had the experience of caring for someone with dementia. When you ask people how they feel about increased personal longevity, a common response is: 'I want to live well into my 80s or 90s, so long as I keep my mind.' That desire, to retain one's cognitive abilities, or rather the thought of losing them, really frightens us. In fact, 56 per cent of Canadians are concerned about being affected by Alzheimer's disease, a similar percentage believe that they would not live well with dementia.

Let's get away from the statistics for a moment. What we want to convey here is that while everyone's experience caring for a loved one with dementia is unique, our own experience and that of some other people that we know who are similarly affected has been less frightening, for sure less devastating, than what these statistics suggest. That doesn't mean that someone, some where is indeed severely challenged with having to care for their loved one with severe dementia. We know too that our own experience with dad will deteriorate further, in time. Daily there are more things being learned about how to prevent some of the contributing causes of dementia and how to potentially elongate the time that it is before the more serious consequences of a diagnosis manifest themselves and how to care well for someone with dementia too!

With that in mind, we would like to suggest that our own experience hasn't yet been all that bad. Like anything, we wouldn't wish for anyone to have to see a loved one afflicted with dementia but when a diagnosis occurs and care becomes necessary for anyone you love, know that there are institutional and personal resources available to help.

It's been a five-year journey so far for us and while there have been many days when dad seems to be somewhere else or hasn't the recall to allow him to blurt out our names, days later, sometimes after a week or more, he has some recall and when you have had decades of great conversations to reflect upon, wonderful past shared moments together, having your loved one recognize or declare that they know you sometimes, can often be enough!