

Living Lost

*Watching Alzheimer's rob
a mother of her memories*

By Larry Burke

Each visit reminds me of better days — days of noisy family gatherings, of quiet late-night talks, of delicious home-cooked meals.

But each visit also means a fresh confrontation with reality: Those golden days are gone forever, lost in the haze of Alzheimer's disease.

Once the glue that firmly bonded a family of four boys and their father, today my mother sits silently in a Boise nursing center, waiting by the hours, weeks, months, years.

Hers was a happy home in a small Idaho mountain town. She was a nurturer, a nest-builder, a perfect mother with endless patience and devotion. She remained essentially a private person, content with the comforts of a few close friends, her church and her family. She created a home that was a warm and loving place, a sanctuary where we would rest from the workaday world.

Now that has disappeared, changed almost instantly on a cold, windy December morning when we tore her from the roots of her own home and moved her to the safer, more comfortable environment of a care center.

Today, the life that was once so rich and full is condensed into a single room decorated only by a few photos to connect her with a past that she has totally forgotten. While she still longs for "home," it is now reduced to an abstract concept, a feeling deep inside rather than a specific place.

Immobile, she lives in a world where she knows no names. My brother and I see her infrequently enough to make us both feel guilty. Visits are a bittersweet experience for us. They are a temporary pleasure for her, at best. She knows we are family, but doesn't remember our names, or that we came the day before. We reach out to her in love, but ours is far out of proportion to what she has given us in the past.

Her story — our story — is not unique by any means. It is played out every day in thousands of households that must

come to grips with the future.

Each of us must deal with the results of Alzheimer's in our own way.

We feel guilt for pulling our loved ones from their homes. We often bear heavy financial burdens as nursing home and medical bills pile up. Many of us, like my brother, are sandwiched between caring for an elderly parent and our own children. We all feel a strong sense of loss as we see our loved one deteriorate before our eyes.

And how must our mother feel as she





senses her own mortality? What must it be like to move from a state of fierce independence to utter helplessness? How does she cope with the loneliness?

Looking at her today, it seems like her life serves no purpose, that its useful span is over.

But that isn't true. She is there to remind us of the struggle that is life itself. She reminds us that you carry on with dignity, patience and courage, regardless of the circumstances. She reminds us that those characteristics are important, even after all else is gone.

She reminds us that we must continually reinvent our lives. To me, that means learning to adjust to a more lonely life, one without her ballast. To her, that means making do with a life confined to one room and regulated by schedules not of her choosing.

Each visit proves to me what a very, very powerful force life can be. She teaches me that we cannot control its final destination, but we can have a great deal to say about the journey itself.

Both of us, my mother and I, choose to make the best of this final stage in the

journey. She still has lessons to teach me — and I can try to make her laugh, even if only for an instant.

And when she smiles, so do I. I smile at all the memories her face represents. I smile at her goodness. But most of all, I smile at her daily triumph over death. And then, walking out the door and into the dark night, I cry inside. □

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