

Family Caregiver Newsletter

Newsletter Date July 2015

The Powerful Caregiver

This column is named after the class "Powerful Tools for Caregivers," a six-session workshop on helping caregiving families thrive (not just survive). It is offered in Racine County several times a year.

MEMORIES – Sorting, Savoring, and Sharing

One touch of sorrow
Makes the whole world kin.

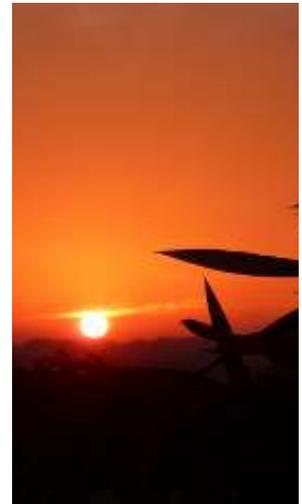
-Rabbi Earl A Grollman

This article is developed from a speech given at a recent Service of Remembrance. I want to share it with readers now because, even though you may not have lost a loved one to death, caregiving journeys often end there eventually, And, even sooner, there are many separate losses when you realize that a once pleasant part of your life is now a memory, probably forever in the past tense. It can be difficult to experience memories of happy times when you first realize they are gone. They naturally bring tears of sadness.

My husband Bryan died 18 months ago. During this difficult time, I've found meaning in sharing memories of him with family and friends and starting new traditions. We have a family gathering to pick raspberries

from the patch he planted but never got to harvest. We celebrated his birthday by starting seedlings for his vegetable garden, then having dinner together with an empty chair at the table and his favorite wine. Many people who knew him keep decorative, silvery snowflakes around all year, just because his love for snow made his eyes twinkle, and that helped us make peace with winter.

The journey from despair to a new mission of remembrance has been a long one. At first, when I had fleeting visions of good times, like skiing in the February moonlight, the tears would flow. My thoughts would be: "How profoundly sad. Those good times are over now...gone forever! and "Why, oh why didn't I appreciate more the time I had with him?" Then one day after a good cry, I



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realized that memories can be an invitation for joy and gratitude, not just a reminder of loss.

The other day as I noticed one of our favorite perennials blooming, tears of grief changed to thankfulness and joy.

Rabbi Grollman in, *Living When a Loved One has Died* says:

Review both pleasant and unpleasant memories -

- Pleasant because of the love you shared.
- Unpleasant – because every relationship is tinged with Unhappiness as well as joy.

Sorting

What memories will we welcome in our hearts and which ones don't serve us well? Memories around our loved one's illness may conjure anger over what happened, and feelings of guilt e.g. "What if I'd done something sooner or differently?" We may have memories of unresolved conflict and hurt. These are all a part of the relationship with our loved ones. We are not perfect and neither are they. I find I need to just acknowledge some memories, but not invite them to stay with me. Dwelling on them would lead to bitterness, and that's an energy drain I can't afford. Forgiveness, of myself and others, is my friend.

Savoring

I have tangible reminders around that trigger memories of Bryan.

These include pictures, stones and sea glass from the beach, his bike helmet, and, of course, snowflakes. This has been a process, and at first I sometimes avoided reminders and focused on pain. This was a necessary part of grieving. Now I like to "unwrap" memories that I picture swathed in silk. If I pause, and take a deep breath, letting the feelings come and go, I reach the point of giving thanks for having experienced a sweet time and remembered it.

Sharing

Share with family, friends, even those who don't know our loved one. One of the greatest gestures of condolences for me was when some friends suggested that we go to dinner so they could hear more about Bryan because they didn't get to know him. I loved the invitation to share. Laughing is one of the healthiest things we can do. It's special to retell stories that bring on the chuckles. I also look forward to sharing memories with Dante, Bryan's now 2 year old grandson.

Many caregivers worry about how they'll handle their loved one's death when it happens, and for many people that becomes a dreaded time to be put out of the mind forever. My experience has been that a person's dying time, though heart-wrenchingly sad, can be sacred and intimate.

Thanks to compassionate and capable hospice services, I was able to spend Bryan's last hours on Earth alone with him. As his breathing became uncomfortable, I whispered in his ear, "Sweetheart, your

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struggle is over. You can just coast now... just coast." He relaxed visibly.

I think Bryan left this world gliding down a gently sloping hill on cross-country skis. I'm forever grateful for the privilege of helping him to do that. Surprisingly, despite the deep loss, I'm grateful to have been there and to have even that memory.

Even now, from the midst of many losses, a caregiver can pluck memorable moments : "I love you"

or just your name spoken; a shared joke; a smile exchanged; a certain look. I hope you'll be able to treasure such moments.

I invite you to consider a pleasant memory right now. Relax, take a deep breath, and let waves of sadness, joy, loss, and gratitude cleanse your heart. That experience may be over, but perhaps the memory can remain your lifelong treasure.



Community Resources

This column highlights some of the many resources in our community. For more, see the Community Resource Directory available from the Aging and Disability Resource Center (262-833-8777) or www.adrc.racineco.com.

Technology to the Rescue

Music is a powerful tool to use when visiting someone, when trying to get through a task or chore, to help with mood and relaxation, or to provide spark and energy for dancing or other movement. Consider developing special playlists that can be added to whatever technology you have available to you from a tape recorder to an MP3 player or I pod. Your local librarian may be able to assist with this project.

GreyMatters is a tablet application that aims to improve quality of life for people with dementia and their caregivers. Through an interactive life storybook, paired with music and games, the app helps patients and families preserve yesterday's memories, as well as share today's joyful moments. See: <http://www.greymatterstous.com/>

The Huffington Post (4/13/15) stated: The idea of using apps with dementia patients isn't a new one, though -- there are plenty of recommended apps out there for caregivers. The **Alzheimer's and Other Dementias Daily Companion app** provides caregivers with activities and engagement suggestions as well as advice on how to handle daily trials, like doctors appointments, misplaced belongings and aggression. Other apps, including **Pandora, Getty Images, YouTube and Brainy App**, can be used with a dementia patient to boost cognitive function through easily accessible music, photos, videos and memory games. **GreyMatters**, however, offers a streamlined, ultra-personal scrapbook optimized specifically for the memory struggles of dementia.

*May I have...
Serenity to
accept the things
I cannot change,
Courage to
change the things
I can, and
Wisdom to know
the difference.*





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Caregiver Opportunities

Caregiver Consultations:

Tasha Orr-Holmes of the Alzheimer’s Association will provide care consultations for families dealing with any type of dementia.

Tasha has openings for Thursday July 23rd from 10:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. The August date is 8/27. We will schedule 2 one hour appointments. To schedule an appointment with Tasha contact Felicia at 262-833-8761.

Summer Seminars at the ADRC

July 24th—“Long Term Care: Planning for my Future Needs.” 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. at the Ives Grove Building 14200 Washington Ave. Free program. Call 262-833-8777 to register.



Support Groups for Family Caregivers

First Thursday 10:30 am-12 Noon
Alzheimer’s Association Group

July 2nd - Aug 6th

For Families Dealing with Alzheimer’s and other Dementias
2000 Domanik Dr, 1st Floor United Way conference room

First Friday 12 Noon-1pm “Caregiver Connection”
Telephone Group

July 3rd— Aug 7th

Call 262-833-8762 to pre-register

Third Tuesday 1:30-3:00 pm

July 21st

Yorkville United Methodist Church
17645 Old Yorkville Rd. (3 Miles West of I-94, Just N of Highway 20)

Second Saturday 10:30 am–12 Noon

July 11th— Aug 8th

Atonement Lutheran Church
2915 Wright Ave
Park and enter in back of building (on South side)

Third Wednesday 1:30-3:00 pm

July 15th

Burlington Senior Center, Eppers Room
209 N Main St

Third Thursday 6:00-7:30 pm

July 16th

Alzheimer’s Association Group
For Families Dealing with Alzheimer’s and other Dementias
Atonement Lutheran Church, 2915 Wright Ave
Park and enter in back of building (on South side)