

Dementia and a Life Well-Lived

Michael Pinto, Ph.D. 11/13/12

Though I am in excellent health and live in a serene and healthy environment, turning seventy last February has certainly focused my attention on a reality I can't ignore, namely, that I am in the last phase (however long it lasts) of my life. I also think about my mother who died last June 30 at the age of 92 ½, surrounded by her family and thankfully passing on within days after having been diagnosed with terminal cancer of the brain. For several years she had experienced growing short term memory loss and though not suffering from Alzheimer's disease (AD), her dementia was upsetting to her and without people continuously around, led to loneliness and depression.

What kept her going was the joy she experienced with family and friends, though as her eyes failed the books she loved to read were no longer accessible and movies no longer of interest as she could not remember from one scene to the next. Until the last month, she still enjoyed her casino gambling though now more for the memories and sounds rather than the visuals that were unavailable to her.

I wonder what will happen to me? Do I have another twenty two years as she did after passing her 70th birthday? Will I be as active as she had been with her antique business, weekly poker games, knitting, puzzles and the excitement of discovering bargains at an estate sale in Leisure World, her final community-home of twenty-five years? Will I be blessed with most of my faculties, as she had been, or will there be growing intellectual and cognitive impairment as so many in my age bracket begin to experience?

There is significant research and numerous clinical trials focused on dementia and AD, examples being an intranasal insulin spray, a potential vaccine, intravenous infusion of Gammagard and genetic manipulation to boost levels of nerve growth factor (Massachusetts General Hospital, "Mind, Mood and Memory; Closing in: Scientists Are Identifying New Strategies to Combat Alzheimer's disease, October 2012). "The reality (though)", says Evelyn Granieri, "is that most people who are around and sentient now are not going to be around for the cure" (p. 58, Hall).

Evelyn Granieri, who is chief of the Division of Geriatric Medicine and Aging at Columbia University Medical Center, has served on a high-level National Institutes of Health panel of experts in 2010 "...that assessed every possible dementia intervention, from expensive cholinesterase-inhibiting drugs to cognitive exercises like crossword puzzles,...(and) found no evidence that any of the interventions could prevent the onslaught of Alzheimer's (disease)... 'There really is nothing. Dementia is a chronic, progressive, terminal disease', she says. 'You don't get better'." (Stephen S. Hall, "The Dementia Plague," MIT Technology Review, Vol. 115, No. 6, p. 52).

Oops. So now what do I do? Just wait and see what happens? Look for alternative therapies, exercise, take vitamins that attack free radicals, or just meditate and hope that reduces stress and allows the body's natural defense mechanisms to do their job?

I have a wonderful and extended family, numerous friends, and a loving and caring wife. I live in the mountains surrounded by nature that is calming and peaceful, with neighbors no closer than one mile away. I

belong to numerous nonprofit organizations, that though taxing at times, gives me great pleasure and a sense of value and importance.

In fact, what I find most wonderful and rewarding is stepping outside of myself and that happens during a conversation, engaging with others in mutually satisfying endeavors, walking in the woods surrounded by the sounds and sights of nature, of sharing with family, friends and acquaintances and in the shared intimacies of life with my wife.

Maybe the question of my mortality and mental acuity is the wrong one to be focused on. If stress is the greatest killer, as we have been told by the health-care professionals, then my life is as close as I can get to a stress-less one. Certainly, recognizing how I spend my time and focus has a lot to do with mitigating against a stressful life, and I try my best to be conscious about each situation I engage in and whether those elements are a positive motivator or a negative element in my life.

In a world containing an infinite number of suggestions about how to live more healthfully, I have found that my best advisor is my inner self. How do I feel emotionally, physically, intellectually? Sure, I find myself groping for a simple word during a conversation or while writing a paper, and my inability to remember names is something well known by my friends. Yet I have choices and they are not about choosing one stress over another. Rather, they are about what feelings leave me happy and relaxed, what thoughts bring peace and calm, what ideas I find intriguing and worth pursuing.

I can't change the world and its problems, though I do act as if my local endeavors have some positive impact on other's lives. What I can affect is my own inner state of being and, though dementia may be in my future, I can only live today and ask the simple question, "if I knew my life had only a short time left, would I live it differently?" And so I don't dwell on what I can't affect but rather continuously pursue a life that I consider well-lived and respected by others.

I leave you with the following; research has shown that most of the information we take in comes through our eyes and so I invite you to watch a beautiful and inspiring ten minute video entitled "Gratitude" produced and directed by Louis Schwartzberg.

Louis Schwartzberg's "Gratitude"

http://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=gXDMoiEkyuQ&vq=medium

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