

## Dementia

Dementia has to do, among other things, with becoming disoriented about time, people, and places – progressively at different rates. I first experienced my wife Jane's symptoms about twenty two years ago but the event passed and all returned to normal until seven years ago – coincidental with a needed surgery – after which the decline has been steady, a fading away as into a mist of sorts – and myself reaching into the mist for whatever tangibility can be possible.

She is now comfortably settled into residential care while I inhabit a home furnished as if she were present – everything in place as it has been for years but more like a place to “muse” as in a “museum” than to dwell.

I visit her every day and there is recognition – no conversation, just touch and the caress of my words, little nothings that I utter like reminders of things we used to do, places to which we used to go (supplemented by photographs), paging through her old high school and college year books, which makes you marvel at how quickly time and youth and beginnings pass away.

All of which hurts – but there is (you could say) a positive cost/benefit. At long last in the isolation of these moments you finally know without a doubt what love IS – and how frustrating it can be when you *now* know it in the wake of opportunities long past when maybe you were too busy to know it and show it.

And there is another such benefit of this phase of our lives. Jane's residence houses perhaps twenty or more other residents, not all dementia cases – but all elderly and each a personality. Their past may be forgotten but their moves, their looks, their individuality, uniqueness stand out – they are a community of interesting human beings that make you want to know more about them. Compared to my living at home, I find myself wanting to visit not only Jane but experience the company of this fragile yet fascinating humanity. (Indeed, I worry that I am becoming too much “at home” there!)

And speaking of positive cost/benefits: you finally begin to recognize how it is the little, ephemeral, even split-second things that really matter in life – that have been like a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price unnoticed upon a counter of costume jewelry or like that grain of sand or wild flower of which William Blake wrote: *To see a world in Grain of Sand / and a Heaven in a Wild Flower.*

In the end it is not the big moments of your life you hang on to but those catalogued by Ira Gershwin when he wrote: *The way you wear your hat / The way you sip your tea / The memory of all that / No, no, they can't take that away from me // The way your smile just beams / The way you sing off-key / The way you haunt my dreams / No, no, they can't take that away from me // . . . The way you've changed my life . . .*