

Chapter 39

GREETING RITUAL FOR ADVANCED ALZHEIMERS

In June 2001, Jeannie, my spouse and companion of 60 years, was discharged from the Montgomery Regional Hospital following a bout with severe blood clots in her left lung. She was sent directly to the Cove Nursing Facility in Warm Hearth Retirement Village (WHRV) where we lived. Until the blood clots occurred, I could care for her at home. We could even go for short hikes on the Appalachian Trail and on the forested trails at WHRV.

After the hospital stay, her Alzheimers worsened and she required nursing care. I visited Jeannie three times daily, usually during her meals, and she could still recognize me. However, she could not understand why I had not been with her continually. Even from the beginning of her stay at the Cove, she was not always sure who our children were.

I began to feel that three visits a day were not enough to keep her familiar with me. All biologists have seen videos of the greeting ritual that birds and mammals use when they have been absent from their mates for even a brief time. I decided to try a greeting ritual with Jeannie. She disliked sudden, "loud," unexpected noises. She especially disliked hearty, high volume "how are you dear?" greetings that are often used with elderly people, even those with superb hearing. So, I always approached her slowly and said in a normal tone of voice: "This is Johnny." Sometimes I had to repeat this greeting several times, but I always did so without raising my voice. Then I would extend my arms and say: "A hug would be wonderful." At our home, we had some small cards that said: "Good for one free hug from any consenting adult." Jeannie had found the cards years earlier at the health food store we frequented. We often passed these back and forth, so a hug was not an unusual event for us. For a long time after she first resided at the Cove, Jeannie would hold out her arms to me, but in the last six or eight months of the Alzheimers, she either raised her arms only slightly or did nothing. I may be delusional, but I think she appreciated, even treasured, that part of the greeting ritual.

Jeannie always, and frequently, during her life would say: "Unasked for kisses are the best kind." So, next I would say: "Here are seven unasked for kisses for you." Jeannie, a biochemist, had a predisposition for numbers – for example, she could always remember the number of steps in each part of any complicated folk dance. When I was giving a lecture at our daughter Karen's university, Jeannie sat in the back row with Karen and counted the number of times I took my glasses off and put them back on (17). Jeannie never mentioned this to me, but Karen did. So, I would tell her she was getting seven unasked for kisses, and then I counted them as I kissed Jeannie's cheek. After this part of the greeting, I caressed Jeannie's cheeks with my hand. Each time I was gone for more than a half-hour (such as consulting with the nursing facility staff), I went through the entire ritual with no corners cut.

Did this greeting do any good? Perhaps not – but I was convinced it did. Jeannie dealt with Alzheimers as she handled everything for her entire life – with no fuss or bother. Her wit, humor, and keen observations were markedly reduced, but they did appear briefly at rare intervals.

During the last months of Jeannie's life, I read folk tales and children's stories to her. One of her childhood favorites was *Till Eulenspiegel* (also *Thijl Ulenspiegel*), a prankster and German folk hero. I read in a calm, normal voice, which I never raised. Before the Alzheimers, when I returned to her from a lecture to a large group, Jeannie would give me a hand signal to turn the volume down when I began speaking to her. Again, I have no idea what these readings meant to Jeannie – perhaps just the sound of my voice reassured her.

Those of us with a loved one afflicted with Alzheimers constantly ask ourselves if we could have done more to make our loved one's life better. In the early stages of Alzheimers, Jeannie would say to me, just a few times: "Johnny, something's wrong." My replies to her never seemed satisfactory. She always dreaded Alzheimers (not death) because of the loss of creativity and independence. To this day, nearly five years after Jeannie's death, I have yet to construct a satisfactory reply to Jeannie's statement.

I am convinced that, while Jeannie did not appear to be aware of events, some part of her brain was receiving information. To avoid falls, I had full-time companions with her during the day. They kept notes on Jeannie's condition. One of them, Jenny, told us that she always told Jeannie what she was doing when Jeannie was awake. Once Jenny said: "I'm just tidying up the room." Jeannie instantly replied: "Johnny will help." I wasn't visiting at the time, so Jeannie's remark indicated that she remembered me and my name, even though I wasn't present. Another time, Jenny had a wildlife program on the television, and the commentator said: "If I was . . ." and Jeannie instantly said: "If I were !" I wish I had been present – the person I had with me for many years had returned at that brief moment. The other companions reported similar brief times.

As a result of these experiences with Jeannie, my view of Alzheimers has been altered. The absence of normal response is deceptive. Parts of the brain are more active than appearances indicate. This observation is probably not true in all cases, but it may be in some. In retrospect, the three daily visits were worthwhile – if I could relive those years, I would not change the time I spent connecting with Jeannie. Those brief moments when the “old” Jeanne returned were worth any amount of time! Each Alzheimers case is unique, but perhaps these insights may help others facing a vastly altered relationship with a loved one. The situation will not be easy, but some brief moments of pure joy may still arise.