

The Scarf

Our father has Alzheimer's Disease. It has been creeping up on him for the last ten years like a slowly rising tide, and finally my mother realized that duty and 66 years together were not enough, she had to put him in residential care and in the process, save herself. That realization came almost too late; a few days after I found a bed for him, my mother spent 9 days in hospital with a sudden but stubborn bout of pneumonia and heart arrhythmia.

The first place that took in Dad was a hospital that accepted dementia patients. Despite that custom, it seemed that they never quite knew what to do with him. Every week there was a complaint about his behaviour and he lost weight so rapidly that the social worker there suspected they were forgetting to take him to the dining room to eat. Within two months, he too, had pneumonia and was obviously deeply disoriented and unhappy.

Fortunately, a bed became available at The Lodge at Broadmead, the veterans' residence in Victoria. The contrast was immediately apparent. While both locations had small rooms and hospital beds and private gardens and activities for residents, the atmosphere at Broadmead was cheerful and homey, with families encouraged to decorate their father or mother's room. The staff are obviously hired for their skill, compassion and patience and thoroughly trained in handling Alzheimer's patients and from the beginning, I noticed that the culture was that of kindness, not bureaucracy or efficiency.

What I find particularly wonderful are the events that break the monotony of their lives. While there are a number of activities throughout the day, once a week, each unit in Broadmead gets a visit from Ania, the Art Therapist, who brings everyone who is able or willing, up to the large, bright art room and gets them going on their projects. Cheerful and having invested in hours of preparation in advance, she has projects for each resident, which they have a say in choosing. One of the nice touches of the program is that the crafts that they make are sold in the gift shop, which defrays the cost of supplies.

Dad had been a truly talented amateur artist, taking up pastels in his retirement with the same attention to order and detail that he had brought to his life-long career in the military. Once Alzheimer's stole much of his capability, I tried to get him interested in taking up his pastels again; but now did not remember ever doing it and resisted any invitation to try...from me. Ania has him painting not only on his designated day, but when I told her that he used to love to paint, she made a point of going to get him every morning for the art class, even if it wasn't his unit's turn.

Slowly Dad has transformed. Now at 89, he is no longer restless and grumpy or visibly frightened. While he still doesn't recognize his surroundings, when we visit him, he looks around and says, "this is a nice place - where are we?" and seems quietly content. And while his mind doesn't remember anything that is new, I believe his body knows that he is well-treated there and that he has moments of happiness, such as when he is painting, or when the volunteers and physiotherapists come to "exercise" the residents by putting on music from WWII and getting them up singing and dancing, or clapping or wheeling them around in their chairs.

About the scarf. On one visit, Dad was in the art room, concentrating on a length of silk, stretched over a board, on which there were three evenly spaced knobs, with the silk tied tightly over the knobs.

"Ahhh..." I said to myself, "Dad's going to do tie-die, and how very much like him to do something with military precision."

I thought no more of it until, on one of my daily long distance phone chats with my mother she said, "Your father painted a scarf and they entered it in the Saanich Fair...it won first prize".

So I wept: ...wept for knowing that he would not remember painting it, even if he saw it— would not remember winning, no matter how many times we was told...wept with deep gratitude for this wonderful place and the people who understand about love and fun and capability and dignity, long past remembering.

My mother bought the scarf from the gift shop and gave it to me for my birthday. I wore it the last time I visited Dad.

He admired it.