

## A laughing matter

“Do you have time to come in and say ‘hi’ to your sister?”  
 “I have a sister? Why didn’t anyone ever tell me?”

This is a conversation I recently had with my father. He was referring to my mother, but his addled brain often mixes things up. You see, my father has Alzheimer disease. Over the last few years he has gradually deteriorated to the point where his cognitive issues are now obvious to everyone. However, I suspect this dementing process has been going on for much longer than we know. My father is outgoing and constantly joking, so he can make it seem like he knows someone without ever actually having to identify them. He still talks to everyone, and he’ll tell me that he used to play golf with complete strangers he meets at the store. These confabulations fit seamlessly into the day-to-day situations he is confronted with. (As an aside, I suspect that he has been making up his golf scores for years.) I’m not sure he is even aware of who I am at times. I still get glimpses of the man

he used to be, and I am very thankful that his underlying personality hasn’t changed. He remains happy, pleasant, appreciative, and easygoing. So far he hasn’t demonstrated any significant irritability or agitation and is blissfully unconcerned about his declining mental functions.

If you asked friends and family to describe my father in one word, I’m pretty sure it would be *jokester*. My father would never turn down an opportunity to goof around, make someone laugh, or dress up in some funny—often inappropriate—costume. This is the man most likely to be found at the office in a gorilla suit, not necessarily on Halloween. I distinctly remember him coming to my parent-teacher interviews and drawing funny faces on the chalkboard. In old party photos he is often dressed up as a woman holding a liquor bottle, but that’s another story. My parents’ house was often adorned with singing Christmas trees, fish, dogs, etc. If my father knew he was going to get dementia, he would have probably made jokes about it and encouraged me to

make fun of him when he no longer made any sense.

Now, don’t get me wrong, this disease is terrible and causes much sadness. I am losing my father, my mother has lost her partner, and my children have lost their grandfather. When I remember the man he was, I suffer a little despair as to all that is missing. However, the humorous things he does make the progression of his dementia more tolerable, and I know he would encourage everyone to laugh along if he could. So, if I giggle a little, I feel less guilty because I remind myself that making people laugh has been his lifelong mission.

Recently friends took him to visit my mother in hospital, which is a 30-minute drive from his house. Later, I asked him how he got there, and after thinking for a while he stated, “I think I walked.”

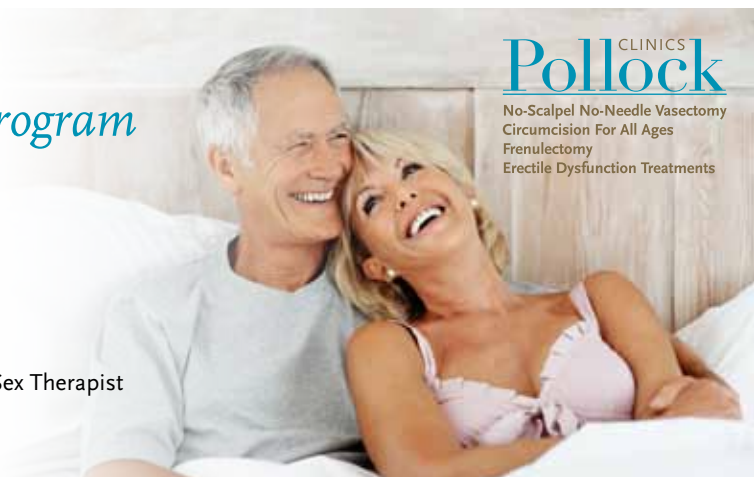
After a chuckle, I thought to myself that living with his dementia really is a journey, and as we walk together I will do my best to support him with grace, love, and laughter.

—DRR

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## Lessons, priorities, mindfulness, challenges, and epiphanies

**W**e buried a colleague recently. To be more precise, we said farewell to a now-deceased colleague. He was a true gentleman, an excellent surgeon, and notably, possessed an incredible capacity to make his family, his friends, and his patients feel special. What was really astounding about him, though, was how he navigated all of the challenges of his personal and professional life with such grace and balance. (He was the only surgeon in town when he first arrived, and is the only surgeon I've ever known to do house calls.) How did he do it? How did he cultivate a resiliency adequate to the demands of his life? And, as his former colleague who is struggling with similar demands, how can I do the same?

Most of his (and my) colleagues who were at his memorial were either

fully retired or had relinquished their hospital privileges years ago. None of them ever expressed regret over their decision to leave the hospital, and many of them told stories of the moments that were the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

**I had been using work to escape from some of the personal challenges I faced. I have stopped doing that and am now enjoying having the majority of my weekends completely free to exercise, cook, read, relax, and spend time with my loved ones.**

I almost had one of those moments a few weekends ago after a particularly grueling overnight call shift and group ward rounds over the same weekend. Although these irritants don't happen often, when they do it is extremely upsetting. After being at the hospital from early Saturday morning to early Sunday afternoon, I was about to pull into my garage when my pager went off. The call was from a nurse asking me to return to the hospital to provide a consent for transfusion on a patient who was about to be transfused for the 16th time over the previous year. I asked politely for her to check the patient's file, as he had received a transfusion as recently as 10 days prior. The nurse looked through his file, found the necessary document, and a return trip to the hospital was avoided.

I planned an early night with the hope of getting a good recovery sleep. It was not to be. My home phone rang

at 2:15 a.m. from a different nurse regarding the same patient. I asked the nurse, in my most polite voice, why he was calling me at that hour as opposed to calling the doctor on call for our group. He told me that it was because he thought I was the doctor responsible for the patient on any day at any hour. The nurse soon realized that I wasn't even this patient's family doctor, so he told me that he would call my colleague instead. Hastily, I corrected him and referred him to the call schedule for our group. He must have been new, as he was completely oblivious to the on-call system at our hospital. So, at 2:15 in the morning, instead of getting a good amount of sleep, I found myself in a highly irritated state trying to politely school this nurse into figuring out which doctor was on call.

The following day I came this close (my right thumb and index finger are just millimetres apart) to giving up my hospital privileges. After venting to colleagues and practising some mindfulness, I was able to calm down. But the events of that weekend along with personal factors in my life have made me re-evaluate my priorities.

I had had an epiphany a few weeks prior. I had been using work to escape from some of the personal challenges I faced. I have stopped doing that and am now enjoying having the majority of my weekends completely free to exercise, cook, read, relax, and spend time with my loved ones. I'm starting to feel like a normal person, perhaps for the first time since I qualified as a doctor. I feel more resilient and happier in my work and personal life. When I remarked on this to my 18-year-old son, he informed me that he had known for years what I had just realized about myself. What a smart kid he is. Hopefully he won't take after his dad!

—DBC

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