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"I'm not the girl I was…"

Donald K. Freedheim [1, 2]

My wife has Alzheimer's. That might not be the precise diagnosis, but her symptoms are practically textbook for it. On a seven-stage scale of the disease, she would be in the latter part of the 5th and early 6th Stage. I have been asked by a number of colleagues to write down what has been happening to Gerda; but up until now, it was too painful and personal to record. I also believed that so much useful information has been written and published that there was no need to add to the literature.

But when Gerda said the words I quoted to title this essay, I felt compelled to write what I have been telling family and friends about her condition. Someone recently mentioned to me that Gerda was a force of nature. That struck me as being very true. As I write this, examples of her energy, her determination, and her incredible accomplishments may be seen. But for now, I will just write what I remember of our journey with this unforgiving disease.

I need to say that I write this as a husband, not a psychologist. Having taught and practiced child psychology, I found many instances of Gerda's behavior and thinking to be much like that of a child. And, I believe I learned a great deal about children's thinking processes by seeing her react to her own situation. Perhaps my training helped me to be more patient than many in dealing with her needs, but I found that I focused on the practical issues and conflicts, before reflecting on their meaning.

The beginning was so subtle, I can't remember when I first recognized any problem. At some point, probably in 2012 or 2013, when Gerda was in her mid-70's, I began to notice that she was having many "senior moments." Gerda was on the Board of our condo in Cleveland, and I recall a meeting when she repeated something that she had said earlier, and members of the Board looked surprised. I realized that something was amiss.

Gerda seemed oblivious to any problems, and I wasn't about to sow any seeds of doubt in her mind. By this time, we were both retired and enjoying all our time with each other. We traveled whenever we wished, to Seattle to visit our eldest daughter, or to Europe, or Asia. We

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[2] *Keywords*: Alzheimer's disease, dementia, mild cognitive impairment, caregiving, spousal caregiving, stress, burden, memory care community

also drove back and forth to Washington, DC, where our other two daughters lived. Gerda had meetings and consulting jobs in DC, and we decided to purchase a townhouse in Alexandria, Virginia some years before our retirement.

Occasionally, I began to notice that Gerda tended to leave her gloves or sunglasses in taxis. Many times, a waitress would run after us with her purse, or I would have to go back the next day to see if they had it. I remember chiding myself for not watching her as carefully as I should have.

One evening when we were in DC, we were preparing dinner at our youngest daughter's home for her three girls. Gerda was standing in front of the microwave searching the buttons. I asked her what she was doing, and she replied, "I'm trying to pre-heat this for the pizza." She showed me the instructions that pertained to warming the pizza in the oven.

I said, "But Gerda, you can't pre-heat a microwave," and she seemed really confused.

Gerda was a wonderful cook. She loved to create meals in the kitchen for any occasion. I realized that the microwave confusion was a bad sign, but I just filed it away and was a bit more alert to any other signs of difficulty.

Then, not too much later, in our own kitchen, she said that the toaster was broken. She had put the bread in and expected it to heat up. Without seeming alarmed, I showed her how to push the lever down. That was when all the alarms went off in my mind and I realized that at times her thinking was becoming confused. Our eldest, Amy, in Seattle called it "failure of executive function," and explained that that was a sign of dementia.

Around this time, we visited Gerda's niece Kristin and family in NYC. Recalling this visit, Kristin told me, "She would look at you after a comment and either say verbally or with a head nod, 'Right Don?' or 'Isn't that right Don?' That stood out for me because normally in discussions, Gerda looked at a person straight in the eye without questioning anything she was saying or needing reassurance."

In late 2014, I began to make plans to move permanently to our town house in Alexandria. Gerda did not resist when I said that driving was getting too hard and that it would be good to live near the girls. In early spring of 2015 when she was 79, I mentioned to one of her best friends that we were going to sell our apartment and move. Lois looked at me and said, "Is that because of Gerda?" I was shocked that she said that. I thought the forgetfulness and slips were only noticed by me.

I made all the arrangements for the move, something that Gerda would normally have done. When the apartment went up for sale, Gerda told others that she was doing all the moving tasks that she had 17 years before when we moved from our home of 30 years to the apartment. I never argued or corrected her. Luckily, the apartment sold just prior to our final drive to DC on October 2nd, 2015. Gerda did part of the driving, although I did more than usual.

Once we moved, our routines didn't change much. We had the grandkids for sleepovers a lot, Gerda cooked all the meals, and we continued to travel. We went to NYC, Easter Island, and Europe. But forgetting things got worse. I couldn't leave her side in any strange environment even for a minute. Her cooking deteriorated, and we only ate frozen dinners, prepared chicken, and pizzas. By this time, I know I was struggling between tending to her needs and feeling unsure and frightened about the future. When I was clearly frustrated with the need for constant diligence I tried to suppress any anger, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. But I tried not to let her know my concerns or angst.

We began to look into retirement communities—just to explore—and even put a deposit down on one in DC. Gerda seemed to have no realization of any changes. Once, when I commented on her memory, she replied, "Well, you know I always had a bad memory." And she was right, forgetting plays we had gone to, etc. By then I was always on the lookout for her things, and I remember saying at one point, "I have bought you more sunglasses and gloves…" to which she would laugh or shrug. She learned to "cover up" when people asked where we had been, or what we had done. There was always a socially appropriate response that did not reveal that she had no recollection of the event.

Near the end of 2017, the girls insisted we talk with our doctor about Gerda's obvious losses. In January, Julie's husband took Gerda to a movie and Sara, Julie, and I met with our doctor at Georgetown Hospital. Amy had written a long letter with her observations, and we explained the current situation. At the end, he said he would see her and refer her to the Memory Clinic.

Several weeks later, she saw the doctor without me present. I have no idea what he said, but after the appointment we met the girls for lunch, and Gerda said cheerily, "I'm going to have an appointment at the Memory Clinic." She seemed almost giddy about it and we were puzzled, but relieved.

A month later, I sat with her during the Nurse Specialist's examination. She tested Gerda with no corrections, just reinforcements (e.g., "Good job")—even when mistakes were made. What I saw was not a surprise. *She failed every test.* As we were leaving she said, "I passed almost everything; got 94 percent!" Where she got that number, I didn't know, but I think that was the result she told me she had in high school on the New York Regents Test.

When we left the clinic, I made an appointment for a follow-up in three months and an appointment for an MRI, just to rule out any brain damage. Gerda showed no resistance to that procedure either. The only problem we had was leaving her new gloves in the waiting room, which I retrieved on another visit. The MRI showed no brain pathology. The doctor gave her the diagnosis: MCI (Mild Cognitive Impairment), "careful cooking and NO driving."

Now the problems began. "No driving! What does that doctor know! You know I can drive!" This was the first of the really difficult things to deal with. It pained Gerda badly to think she had to give up driving. When I went through a stop sign, or had to put the brakes on quickly, she would yell that I was the one who shouldn't be driving and that she should take over the car. We had been all through this with both my parents—although, she never mentioned that now. At times she would beg me to let her drive and I would even show her the words on the diagnostic page from the hospital. Interestingly, she never asked what the "MCI" meant.

It was not easy for me to deny her this important symbol of independence. One day we were at the grocery store, just three blocks from our house in Old Town. Before she got into the car I said, "Would you like to drive home?" She threw her arms around me and started to cry. "Oh, may I!" I held my breath as she carefully drove to the house. And once there, she thanked me over and over.

But that was the last time. Our daughter in Seattle is a Criminal Prosecutor who specializes in vehicle felonies, drunken and distracted drivers. She put the fear of God in me when she said if Gerda even just touched someone while driving, I could be taken for thousands. The physician had diagnosed MCI and written, "No driving." There would be no excuse if she were in an accident, no matter how minor. It was as if she had had five drinks. So, we just struggled through that, and often she would say to me, "Do you know how hard it is for me not to drive?"

What could I say? It broke my heart.

That spring we went to Florida to visit her brother and several of our good friends who lived there part-time. On one occasion, her very good friend Nancy drove us around Longboat Key and stopped at a post office. Gerda got out of the car, slammed the door and just marched around. When she got back in, she yelled at me, "How come Nancy can drive and you won't let me!" I suddenly realized that it wasn't Gerda talking, but the disease. Although her words were very painful to me, I learned that I had to differentiate that sort of talk from more rational comments. When her usual honesty revealed the reality of her condition, she had to deal with the fearfulness, and striking out at me may have been her defense.

A month before we were to go back to the hospital for the second evaluation, I was looking at the calendar and called it to her attention. Gerda stared at me and said, "Please don't make me go back there." I asked, "Why not?" She then said, with insight that cut right through all her defenses and cover ups, "Because I won't do any better than I did, and there is nothing they can do for me."

I was stunned. The two things that I admired most about Gerda were her independence and her honesty. There was no guile, no holding back her thoughts. A book on the civil rights movement in Cleveland Heights features Gerda, and a close colleague in that effort was quoted as follows: "…unlike most women of our generation, Gerda was unafraid to say what she thought…she was like a steamroller, who always managed to get things done." (In, Susan Kaeser, *Resisting Segregation*, Cleveland Landmarks Press, 2020, p.86).

I promised Gerda that she would not have to go back to the hospital for the evaluation. I called our doctor and the nurse specialist to tell them what she had said. Their responses were identical. They each said that she was right. Unless she wanted to join a cohort for observation and research, there was no reason for her to have more evaluations. The nurse also confided, that after our visit and upon reading Amy's observations, the diagnosis should have been Moderate, not Mild, Cognitive Impairment.

We were now in the spring of 2018 and Gerda was 82 years old. The girls and I began looking seriously into retirement facilities. Sara and I went back to the DC facility where we had placed a deposit. The location would not have been easy for our daughters to get to, so Sara investigated a few places closer to her in Arlington. Eventually, she found The Jefferson, just a mile from her home and in Ballston, a thriving urban center. When Julie returned, they visited, talked with several staff, and thought it would be a great place and a perfect location.

How right they were! Gerda, the girls and I had a wonderful brunch there in June and that was it. We were soon to learn that the staff was dedicated to their work and really cared about the residents. By this time, Gerda was going along with everything I suggested (not exactly her usual style during our 60 years of marriage), and she turned to me for every decision. But she did make one crucial decision, which showed she still had good judgment. I had expected to buy a two-bedroom condo in order to accommodate sleepovers with our granddaughters (whom I forgot were growing into teenagers). When we looked at one, Gerda said, "We don't need a place this big, let's get the one bedroom." We moved in on August 17th, 2018.

From the time we moved, things did not go well with Gerda. For one who was always popular in any environment, she felt unsure and insecure. I saw she was struggling. She was struggling with everyday conversations with people. And they naturally didn't stay interested. She found it difficult when residents would focus on me, as she took that as being ignored. If we got on the elevator and someone started talking to me, she felt offended.

This was completely out of character for her. We were invited to a Super Bowl party with friends, and I went into their den to watch the game. Nervously I left Gerda with the women in the living room. When we got back to our apartment, she complained that she had "Nothing to talk about with those ladies, who talked about cooking and flowers…and who were they, anyway?" It was sadder than just not being interested in those topics; it was not being able to connect on any level for a person who always could fit into any social situation.

Gerda did connect with two men at The Jefferson. One was Steve, a former executive with IBM. He had a wonderful, subtle sense of humor, the kind that Gerda always loved. We made fast friends with Steve and his wife, Irene. I could sense immediately that Steve was in the early stage of dementia. But he was so calm and even in his personality that when he asked us which cabin we were in, I thought he was kidding. But he wasn't. As Steve declined and began to wander, he required an aide. Gerda could never understand why Steve needed an aide. Eventually, he went to the Third Floor, the memory unit. But he and Irene would have dinner with us about once a week in the main dining room. It took a long time for Gerda to understand why he was not living with his wife in their apartment.

The other person Gerda related to was Merton, who had been with the Foreign Service. By the time we met, he was hardly talking anymore. He had a wonderful, caring wife and lived in their apartment with almost full-time aides. Gerda would say to me, "I can get Merton to talk" (and she could) and questioned his need for an aide.

Gerda developed a noteworthy behavior. She always liked to dance, the faster the better. Before the covid-19 virus hit, we had about four dances a year at The Jefferson and Gerda loved every one. She would pull Steve to dance and even got Merton on the floor. She wanted to dance every time the music played, even asking women to dance with her. One of her favorite partners was a terrific 105-year-old woman who loved to dance with Gerda. We had lots of music, with a pianist in the "living room" before and after dinner. As time went on, Gerda would dance every time we passed the piano, with me, or a resident, or even alone. I don't think others noticed, as I did, how she became almost obsessed with dancing. It was the one thing she could do, when all other activities didn't interest her. Even her avid reading diminished in time, as I saw her staying on the same page for a long time.

She also loved to see movies, even old black and white ones that she never enjoyed before. We would go across the street to see a movie, any movie, two or three times a week. On the weekend, Julie or Sara would often take her to the same movie she had seen with me, but she never realized she had seen it before. On one occasion we had been to the Kennedy Center to see "Aladdin," the sort of musical she began to love. A few days later, a ticket became available for the same show and our friend, Pete, agreed to take her with a small group. I gave Pete her Metro card, and he knew the need for keeping her close by. When they came back, Gerda raved about the show that had been so different from the one we had just seen. But she also said how embarrassed she felt that Pete had to hold her Metro card. I explained that she had no pockets to carry the card, but she said she had (I checked the tights—no pocket). She said she felt like a baby. It saddened me, but was soon forgotten.

We had many services in the neighborhood, including a drug store a block and a half away. Every time Gerda would say she had to go to the store, I would say, "I need something, too." At one point she said, "I don't need you to come along." Eventually, I wore out my excuses and offered, "But I'd like to be with you, would you *mind* if I came along." She then said, "Please, let me go alone." She had always been such an independent person, I understood her feeling about my constantly being with her. So on this occasion I said, "Okay, you can go alone; but I'll just follow and get what I need too."

We got to the end of the first block; she looked around, clearly unsure of which way to go. I just lagged behind. My being there prevented her from panicking, I think, and she said, "Gee, they've built so many new buildings that I'm unsure about this corner." A logical misconception to explain her being lost; and she asked me the way. That was one of many rationalizations that helped her cope with a devastating reality. There would be many more examples of that thinking coming.

Interestingly, Gerda seemed to accept my doing the cooking without difficulty. She would say, "Donald does all the cooking now and I clean up." I wanted to clean up as well, but it clearly bothered her when I did, so I let her do that.

Our girls were also pointing out to me the changes they saw in their mother. On a visit to Seattle, Amy and Gerda had a mother-daughter weekend at Leavenworth, a Bavarian style village. When they returned, Amy told me that Gerda had no insight into any of the difficulties she was having; ordering dinner, understanding some of the sights, remembering Amy's childhood experiences, etc. I had observed that also. But every once in a while, she did have insight into the situation. I clearly remembered, when she said, almost out of the blue, "I have a strong body, and a weak mind." That was her honesty, breaking through the fears and defenses.

Over the next year we travelled to the West Coast a couple times. But it became too difficult. I had to be 'on my toes' constantly not to lose sight of her in large crowds. I made sure to get non-stop flights, but in December, 2019, our flight was cancelled. We had to go back to The Jefferson and leave the next morning and then that the flight had a stopover. I was particularly aware of how vigilant I had to be, waiting outside the ladies' room, making sure we had all our belongings, watching her every move—I vowed never to travel again.

Then, the covid-19 crisis hit and brought major changes. All the activities at The Jefferson were halted, the dining room was closed, music in the living room ceased. There were no more movies next door, no events at the Kennedy Center; it was as if the world outside our apartment had stopped. And the limitations took a huge toll on Gerda. She kept asking, "Why do we live in a prison?" It was impossible to keep a mask on her face.

There were other changes, too. Gerda started to complain about the bed, "Why do you make me sleep on a table?" I tried to explain that it was the same mattress we had for 12 years, brought over from Old Town. But she insisted we get a real bed and not this mattress. Being confined to the apartment was also hard. We took walks outside, but she complained that we never went anywhere. On one occasion, she ran out of the apartment down the hall in her underwear. I yelled, "What are you doing!" And she said, "There's no one out there." I was furious and almost said, *Are you trying to get us kicked out of here?* It was futile to explain that the security could come around anytime, or someone could open their door. I felt much of this was just to defy me and the rules. I let it go, but was terribly worried that the incident could happen again.

There is an important rule with Alzheimer's patients that one does not remind those with dementia of their mistakes. It only raises their anxiety and the matter is forgotten quickly. I made up a kind of mantra or code that helped me deal with her unreasonable statements or behavior. It was *"No C's, No C's."* There was no reason to Correct, Contradict, or Comment about mistakes or negative behavior she was demonstrating. I would try to remind myself of the rule, "*No C's, No C's!"* and felt so bad when I slipped.

There were more difficult changes. Gerda started to lose interest in personal hygiene. She wouldn't brush her teeth, or want to take a shower, or even wipe herself on the toilet. My reminding didn't help. At times she was compliant, at other times, defiant. Often, she forgot to put toothpaste on the brush, and once she started to rub her toothbrush on the soap. I said, "It would be better to use toothpaste." And she replied, "That's a good idea." That phrase became a standard response to my suggestions.

At the beginning of 2020, a more serious problem appeared. She began to lose control of her bladder and bowels. I bought a package of Depends, which she clearly needed. Wow…was that a battle! "I can't sleep in these! They're too bulky. I can't walk in these! They rub and hurt me." I tried different brands. I tried different sizes. Nothing fit comfortably. Unfortunately, you have to buy a whole pack and if she didn't like it, I was stuck with all the rest. I finally said, "You used to have your period and wear a pad." That didn't go anywhere. In the middle of the night, she would rip the underpants off. At first, I argued with her and then just said nothing. On several occasions, after I stopped responding, I noticed she would slip them back on again. And there were accidents. With mixed feelings of resentment and resignation, I would clean things up, sometimes in the middle of the night. She would act defiant, but I knew that she felt terribly guilty. Not about the accident, but about my having to clean up. And that made me feel worse than her indifference to the accident.

At one point, Gerda said something so "funny" in a way that I repeated it to friends at The Jefferson. She said, "Don, I know why you want me to wear these things. Because you're afraid I'll mess up the bed. But I'll mess up *my* side of the bed, not yours." She did not intend to be funny; it was a perfect example of a logical misconception.

Showers were difficult, but washing hair was impossible. I would con her to get in the shower, "Gerda, I need you to wash my back." And once in, I would "accidently" get her hair wet and immediately rub in hair wash, with apologies for having to get the soap off. Before we were done, we even laughed sometimes.

Gerda became increasingly angry with me and I asked her once, "Why are you so mad at me?" She replied, "Because you boss me around all the time!" The way I was bossing her around was by saying, "Gerda, you have to brush your teeth now," or "You have to wash." It was exactly the way she had been with her mother around three or four years of age. I know she was a, "I want to do it myself," kind of kid because her mother had told me how defiant she was as a child.

In the spring of that year, people at The Jefferson could see what a difficult time we were having. Our diet was bad, I was constantly dealing with the hygiene issues. On walks outside, she would say, "I just pooped in my pants." We would walk back, get in the bathtub…. Of interest, she never got mad at me on those occasions, but was docile in letting me clean her up. I could sense, or maybe I misread, her feeling grateful for the help.

Gerda's 84th birthday on April 27th went largely unnoticed. There was a celebration at Sara and David's home, but she never realized it was for her. Around that time, she had a difficult time being alone. If I were in the den working, she would say, "Why aren't you here with me watching TV?"

It was then that the girls insisted I get an aide for her. I had resisted because that was my job. So, I relented and hired an aide from the agency in The Jefferson. I said that a nurse was coming to help her with some chores and when the woman arrived, Gerda threw her arms around her. I think she believed that the "nurse" would help her—and maybe even relieve me of some duties, which may have pleased her. But soon she was not so welcoming. Gerda didn't want me to leave and I had to sneak out quickly when the aide came. It was only for a two hour stretch, but Gerda resisted everything the aide tried to do—get her dressed, bathed, even prepare lunch. The aides reported to me that she did not seem to miss me when I was gone, but they were frustrated by her defiance. When they took her for walks in the 2nd Floor living room, residents reported to me that Gerda would race ahead of the aide and generally give her a hard time. And when I returned to the apartment, Gerda was really upset, "Where did you go? Why didn't you at least call me? Never leave me alone again!"

Over a couple of months, we went through three different agencies, with four different aides. Gerda said, "Why do I have to entertain these women?" "Why do you leave me?"

Finally, I said, “Gerda, it wasn’t my idea; our daughters insisted we have an aide.” And then her classic reply: “Are you going to let our teenage daughters tell us what’s best for us!” Instead of trying to explain it, I just quietly said, “What age were we when we started to make decisions for our parents?”

I wondered why she was so happy at first to have the aide, but then resisted her so. Then I remembered her good mood when we made the appointment for the memory clinic. It occurred to me that the *anticipation* of these events might have made her feel that she would be cured. (Just as when we are sick, we tend to feel better when we get an appointment with a doctor.) But when they didn’t cure her, the reality set in and her mood changed to anger or depression.

Around that time, she made another revealing comment. After all the struggle around driving, once we moved into The Jefferson she always got into the passenger seat of the car. On one occasion, when we were in the garage about to start the car, I broke the “no C’s rule.” I looked at her and said, “Gerda, why don’t you drive anymore?” She turned to me and immediately responded, “Of course I don’t drive; you sold my car. This is your car. I wouldn’t drive your car!” Wow…she was right, we had sold her car, but we always had just one car in Alexandria, and she drove it as much as I. What a perfectly logical misconception. She had reasoned to herself why she didn’t drive.

Gerda and I had always talked about what would happen as we aged. The only conclusion we ever reached was that we would “Go together.” The how’s were never much discussed. Many years earlier she had joined the Hemlock Society, and we both agreed that a life not worth living was untenable. But by now the realities of her diminished functioning could never really be discussed. When she got angry at my insistence of her staying in the apartment, or other restrictions, she would sometimes say, “Okay, if I’m demented, I’m going up to the Third Floor to live with Steve and you can live with Irene;” or, more harshly, “I’m going over our balcony.” I often thought, if she had the wherewithal, she might do it—she was that strong minded.

From the time that covid curtailed our activities, friends, and even staff members, asked me how I was doing and seemed concerned about my welfare. Several even commented that I had lost weight, which I was hardly aware of. I was focused on Gerda’s needs and was in denial of the burden her care demanded. But I realized that she was not eating properly, not getting the best personal hygienic care, and unhappy most of the time because of all the restrictions and “bossing” that she had to endure. Late in the spring, our daughters approached me and said the words that I’ll never forget, “Dad, we’ve lost our mother, we don’t want to lose our father.”

And that was it. I replied, “Okay, but you’ll have to find the place and make the transition.” We met with the intake staff of our Memory Care unit and Gerda was evaluated by the doctor and the social worker. She was certainly eligible, but because of the covid situation, there would be no visitation (even by me) and the possibilities of her just leaving her room were terribly limited. Even the General Manager of The Jefferson, who knew Gerda well, told me she should not be placed there. It would be the equivalent of solitary confinement. So, Amy and her wife, Yvonne, searched on the internet and explored places around The Jefferson and beyond.

They did virtual tours and spoke with directors of facilities. Soon, they discovered Arden Courts of Silver Spring, a facility that specialized only in memory care. Ironically, there was an Arden Courts outside of Cleveland where a good friend of ours was living, and where we had visited several times. The Silver Spring facility was less than 10 minutes away from Julie and Mark's home.

In early July I visited the facility, filled out all the paperwork, and scheduled the tests necessary for her admission, which was scheduled for Friday, July 24th. Now, we had to come up with a scenario that would avoid, as much as possible, the trauma—to both of us—that Gerda's move would cause. My twin brother, David, who lived in San Diego and has a minor heart condition, helped me concoct the following: On Thursday evening, the night before the transition, about 9 pm David called from San Diego. We were in bed, and I had Gerda answer the phone; he asked to be put on speaker. As rehearsed weeks before, he said he had seen a doctor for his heart problems and would be admitted to the hospital the next day. I immediately said, "We'll fly down to be with you!" And he responded, "I was only able to get one seat on a flight tomorrow (due to covid) and they will only let one visitor at the hospital." I turned to Gerda and said, "Would you stay with Julie so I can fly to be with David?"

She said, "Yes, of course." David then gave me all the flight information and hospital address, in detail. Her reaction was immediate and so interesting to me. She said, "Don, don't worry. He's going to be all right." And she started stroking my arm to comfort me. Then she went into the kitchen, brought me the large box of Metamucil that I was giving to her, and just handed me the container, saying, "This will make you feel better." What amazed me was her switch from so much recent self-centeredness (complaints about the bed, etc.) to her trying to soothe me.

When we got off the phone, I got out our suitcases and the clothes I had prepared for her and put them near the door. We went to sleep, with her continuing to tell me that all would be fine and rubbing my arm. The next morning, I reminded her that Julie was picking us up, so there was no surprise when she arrived as planned, with her two daughters (who later helped me recall all the events that morning). We took the two bags down to the car. All the way to the airport, Gerda held my hand and continued to assure me that David would be fine, and I should not worry. At the airport I was emotional, but Gerda assumed it was about my brother. She got out of the car and we kissed with masks on. Then she said, "A real kiss." I carried my empty bag in, waited until they had left; and then proceeded to the Metro to go back to The Jefferson with a very heavy heart.

Meanwhile Julie continued driving to Arden Courts. Just before arriving, she turned to Gerda and said, "You can't stay with us because Mark tested 'positive,' but we have a lovely hotel like the fitness ranch you like to go to in Tecate, Mexico." The girls reported that Gerda seemed a bit confused but went to the entrance and two ladies came out saying, "Welcome to Arden Courts Ranch, we've been waiting for you." Gerda replied, "Really, how did you know we were coming?" Julie covered up by saying, "We told them that because Mark had tested positive, we couldn't stay at home."

We couldn't plan for what would happen next, when Julie said they had to leave. Gerda said, "Aren't you staying with me?" When Julie said no, Gerda pulled off her mask and said, "Well I'm out of here, too!" And started to go through a door. The staff assured Julie that the door led into the facility, and they would take it from there. Sure enough, another staff member was playing some music and started to dance with Gerda. He also had a video of Randy Rainbow, who Gerda knew and loved, and she became absorbed with that.

It may seem harsh, but in order to allow a new resident to adapt to the environment of the therapeutic facility, Arden Courts had certain rules. I was not permitted to contact Gerda for at least a month, and when she asked about me, the staff said I was still with my brother in California. I received a call from the staff each evening, assuring me of her adjustment. Our anniversary happened to be on August 3lst and I just had to call her. I told her I was still in California, that David was doing well, and I would see her soon. The story lasted for about six weeks when I was permitted to visit, and I finally got to hold my wife.

Before Gerda was admitted to Arden Courts, Julie had a brilliant idea. When Gerda was about 12 years old, she was given a dog, a brown dachshund. She named him Schmaltz and they were inseparable. At our wedding at Gerda's home, Schmaltz even sat on the floor between us during the ceremony. Julie went on the internet and found a brown dachshund stuffed animal and gave it to Gerda. She has carried it with her over the last year and a half. For very young children a soft object, like a blanket or rag doll, is an important "transitional object" as they develop trusting relationships. And it is not uncommon to see those with dementia taking comfort with stuffed animals, as well.

Visiting was difficult during that time. First, the pandemic situation allowed only one, one hour visit a week. And if any staff or residents tested positive, there was no visitation in the facility. For two months, December and January, I could visit only once during each month! But, in reality, the timing made no difference to Gerda. If I had seen her the week before, or month before, she was always surprised and greeted me with tears. But this seemed to be specific with me. When the granddaughters visited, she would greet them happily and they made videos of her dancing. We even have a video of her saying to Julie, "This is a beautiful place; they help me with whatever I need."

As the covid crisis began to lessen, I was able to visit twice a week and even take her out to Julie's home on one of those visits. She returned with Julie and Mark because it was difficult for both Gerda and me to separate, but Julie would say that she would not ask about me and went into the residence easily. For Gerda there was no yesterday and no tomorrow—just what was happening at the present moment. I could see that clearly.

Schmaltz continued to be a constant companion. One Sunday, my friend Pete came with me to pick up Gerda for our visit to Julie's house. Pete brought along his Scottish terrier, Millie, and when we got into the car, Millie jumped onto Gerda's lap in the front seat. Gerda turned around and said, "Pete, I'll take care of Millie up here and you can take care of Schmaltz." Both Pete and I recalled that she did this with absolute seriousness.

For a person who always had to know where she was and what was happening around her, she never asked me, “What is this place? Why am I here?” She would say, “I have nothing in common with these people”—referring to the other residents, not to the staff, with whom she related very well. She interacted with the staff, as she was one of a few active residents, dancing and even being playful, which was very much in her character. I knew she was in the right place when a staff member said, “We know how to talk to Gerda, we don’t tell her what to do.”

She also used to say, “Promise me you will take me out of here,” or “Don’t bring me back.” I learned that this was very common with dementia. Once in a while, her insight just cut right through the fog. On at least two occasions she looked straight at me and said, quietly and clearly, “I’m never going to leave here, am I? I’m going to die here.” I was so stunned, I couldn’t respond.

On one occasion my twin brother visited. He told me later, when Gerda saw him, she threw her arms around him and whispered breathlessly, “You’re not going to take Donald away from me, are you?” David assured her that he wasn’t, and she breathed easier. The insight was there.

The staff assured me that she did well when I wasn’t there, although at times they would say, “She does miss you.” Maybe they thought I would like to hear that. I never said what I felt, which was that I didn’t want her to miss me. I didn’t want her to have the pain and sorrow that I was going through. She was in a different world, and I hated to disturb that world.

There was one evolving phenomenon which amazed me as a psychologist. For the first six months or so, during my visits, Gerda would say, “You were gone so long, I thought you were dead.” I understood this completely as a logical misconception of my absence. She was trying to find a reason why I wasn’t around after 60 years of togetherness. But after a while, that changed completely. We were walking down the hall, arm in arm, when she turned to me and said in a matter of fact tone, “Don, did you marry someone else.” No emotion, just as something that would explain my absence. I exclaimed, “Oh Gerda, I would never marry anyone else!” But after a few months, when I was allowed to take her out of the building, that changed again. All of a sudden, she looked at me and said, “Will you marry me?”

At first, I wondered where that came from and then it hit me. It made perfect sense. Before we were married we didn’t live together, we didn’t sleep together. I realized this was her logical misconception which explained why we weren’t together. She validated this thinking on one of my visits. We were sitting on her bed, and she turned to me and said, “When we marry, you can stay here with me.” That made sense out of my infrequent visits. It didn’t matter that sometimes she introduced me as her “boyfriend,” and sometimes as her “husband.” That discrepancy was irrelevant. When she needed to explain my absence to herself, she reasoned that we weren’t married yet. Interestingly, she often asked Julie, “Do you have a boyfriend?” And Julie would respond, “Mark is my boyfriend.” Gerda then said, “That’s good, Mark is a good man.”

During the first year she was at Arden Courts, I could tell that the steep decline she had at The Jefferson over the previous six months had leveled off. But during the second year, she showed more signs of a decline. Her walking was much slower and she began to lose any sense of balance; it was harder to understand her speech, which became very limited and reduced to whispering; and her facial expression didn't change very much.

We had brought a large number of *National Geographic*'s and the history magazine they publish. She mainly looked at the pictures; but as time went on, they began to disappear from her room until they were all gone.

But other signs showed that she was adjusting better to Arden Courts. When we went out, she stopped begging me not to take her back. Once when we were at Julie's, she turned to me and said, "Are you going to take me home?" I was surprised. That was the first time she used the word "home" when referring to Arden Courts. I also noticed that she related better to the residents. I would now find her sitting with them in the living room and not lying on her bed. One time when Julie took her back to Arden Courts, she forgot the "no C's rule" about not commenting on difficulties. Julie said something like, "I'm so sorry you have to live here alone." Once again, Gerda broke through the dementia, "I'm not the girl I was."

Unless I were present to give a context, she seemed to forget who other family members were. But when I arrived, her arms went out and she pressed herself against me. Eventually, our only discourse became a mouthed or whispered, "I love you." But we could still be playful; I would respond with the same words and add, "I love you more." And she would smile and say the same thing back, to which I would say, "You always have to have the last word!" And we would laugh. But by this point her whispered words meant everything to me.

It must be true that love doesn't die…

Before ending this memoir, I must say that despite this awful illness, I have much to be grateful for—the tremendous support I have from our daughters and their children, from my twin, from my and Gerda's friends all over the country, and especially from the friends at The Jefferson who have become a second family. I treasure the wonderful memories of our 60+ year magical marriage, with its joys and adventures all over the world. There are many I know who have experienced the agonies that this dreaded disease causes, without the support and companionship that I am so lucky to have. Whatever the future holds, I hope I shall not forget these fortunes.

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