

Of a certain age

By Sue Stafford
Columnist

My mother had Alzheimer's. My sister-in-law is currently living with Alzheimer's. A number of my Transitions clients when I worked for hospice had a diagnosis of Alzheimer's. My own lapses of memory are increasingly noticeable.

More than once in conversation with friends I have heard people say, "If I develop Alzheimer's just take me out and shoot me." I myself in the past have told my sons, "If that happens just take me out in the woods, prop me up against a tree, and let the animals eat me." Those are the kinds of statements people make, considering it preferable to be shot or eaten by wild animals than to live with Alzheimer's or other dementia. It is way past time to develop and adopt new language and new attitudes toward not only Alzheimer's, but the entire natural process of aging in general.

The language that has grown up around Alzheimer's is in some ways very militaristic. For the past four decades, we have been "waging war," attempting to "halt," "fight," and "arrest" the "attacks or strikes" of this "menace," causing us to regard Alzheimer's the way we viewed polio prior to the Salk vaccine. With that kind of vocabulary Alzheimer's becomes viewed as a disease epidemic coming from outside our bodies and simply awaiting a vaccine or cure.

These war metaphors may have been necessary to get the attention of the public and to help encourage research funding. However, that language has demonized our own human susceptibility to normal aging processes, which we can then externalize. There is promising research being conducted that can hopefully help us understand Alzheimer's more fully and perhaps find a way to postpone or slow the development of plaques and tangles in the affected brain, and that's a good thing.

Even more important

than the research is the adoption of a new lexicon for talking about aging and dementia in general, and Alzheimer's specifically. Rather than considering "being over the hill" a negative indicating that meaningful life is over, what if we saw it as a positive time, with some of the struggles and insecurities of younger times passed? Being "further along the path of life" is a kinder, more realistic description indicating you are now someone who has had the life experiences that give rise to wisdom, patience, and understanding.

There is other language around dementia that incorrectly paints the picture of "loss of self," being a "shell of my former self," a "living death" with "nobody home." This stereotypical blanket language implies that the person we know is no longer there, which can make it easier to ignore or not attempt to engage them in meaningful activity. If "they don't know what's going on" why bother to engage or visit them?

The truth of the matter is, identity is never completely gone until death. My mother was still my mother, Alzheimer's or not. The problem was not only her condition, but our lack of proper understanding as to how to meaningfully interact with her. Yes, it still would have been difficult to watch her mental capacity decline and she might still have been difficult to deal with at times. However, had I known then what I know now, I think her quality of life could have been dramatically improved and perhaps our experience of her.

Studies and programs have shown the great benefit of incorporating music, art, and horticulture into the daily activities of people living with dementia. Enjoying music they have always loved doesn't require people to be verbal, and amazing things can happen when deep memories are tapped by a familiar piece of music. People who have been labeled as nonverbal will begin to sing along or talk about things they remember

in connection to the music or to that time in their life. They are still here. We have sparked recognition and engaged them.

Art and horticultural activities work in a similar way. Let someone smell a rose or some lavender and they are apt to tell you about their grandmother's or their own garden. We need to take the time and show interest in connecting with those living with dementia and providing meaningful, enriching activities for them. Additionally, there is a much more respectful way to talk to dementia-affected people than what has been employed for so long. (That's a whole separate topic.)

Aging is not optional, and diminished capacity, whether physical and/or mental, is part of aging. As I approach my elderhood, I do know that I don't want to be isolated from my human networks simply because I am getting older. I don't want to be alive physically but living through a "social death." I am hopeful that people will look at my peers and me as "mentors" rather than patients or "victims," with something to offer.

Viewing aging people as contributors to society, rather than a collective burden to be housed and managed, will hopefully prompt communities and organizations to explore how to accommodate, utilize, accommodate and benefit from the presence of elders. Hopefully if we consciously start using different language when talking and thinking about individuals affected by brain aging, we will change our attitudes and behavior toward our aging neighbors and our own aging brains.

How lovely it would be for the Sisters community to coalesce around a more humane, life-affirming approach that connects us to our elders and enables them to live a fuller, richer life that is also of benefit to our community.

ALBERTSON: Presentation is free and open to the public

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because he is able to draw on a lifetime memory bank of things, colors, people and places.

His intimate familiarity with his beloved Metolius River allows him the freedom to wander along the river, alone with no assistance, carrying his tripod over his shoulder and his camera gear in his backpack. A lifetime of handling camera equipment and creating photographs sustains his ability to continue to pursue his passion for capturing images of nature with clarity, sensuality and attention to detail.

Albertson will share the challenges and opportunities presented by his blindness. He has created new tools and made many accommodations to enable his continued pursuit of photography. Brightly colored reflectors on lens caps help him to find them if they get dropped. He has learned to put things back in the same place every time so he can more easily retrieve them later.

Transportation around Camp Sherman is provided by his specially equipped four-wheeled recumbent bike that is painted a bright yellow allowing Albertson to see his bike and for him to be seen by others.

The fact that a barely sighted man can shoot exquisite photographs is amazing in itself. But the most notable quality of Albertson's is his upbeat take on life and his gracious appreciation for the gifts he says his blindness has provided.

"I used to be an aloof Norwegian, standing on the perimeter of things. With my

blindness I've learned to be thankful, to accept the gifts of people who have come out of the woodwork to be of assistance. And now I am so appreciative because I have learned what friendship is. People in this area are so helpful... so you could say that I'm living in heaven — living where I should be."

Albertson went on to say, "Lose your eyesight and you'll break down your old 'rules.' You're going to have to say thank you a lot. I've gone from being very independent to very dependent and it's OK."

He approaches his blindness as if it were a game. For example, if someone fills a plate with food for him, he doesn't know what he's getting. There can be no preconceived notion regarding the flavors or textures so he gets to be surprised when he puts the food in his mouth. Having the courage to allow himself to be surprised is an awakening process. He said he has taken on being blind as an adventure, not a disability.

Standing beside the Metolius River as Albertson explained how he captures his images, his passion and enthusiasm for his world were contagious, and this reporter was left impressed by his great appreciation for all that life offers — challenges, opportunities and rewards.

Albertson will show slides of his work as he describes how he continues his photography as he journeys into darkness. He will discuss why he has dedicated his life to photography, provide information on the equipment he uses, and then share who he is through his photographs, his children as he calls them. The presentation is open to the public and is free of charge.

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