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Let's cherish, not fear, those with dementia

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It's terrible to watch a relative succumb to the disease but we must never lose sight of the human being we love



My father came for an early Christmas, whistling to himself as he wandered round the house rearranging the angel choir he had bought years ago while we lived in Germany, smelling the branches of the Christmas tree, rolling the baubles in the palms of his hands, wandering outside and feeling the damp of the grass on his trousers. He's had dementia for 14 years now. His mind is like a scrambled computer, he remembers random words, disconnected half-sentences and snapshots from childhood.

His 14 grandchildren will buzz around him chatting. He has no idea they are his relatives; he can't remember his own four children. But he feels he is among people who are fond of him. He is acutely aware of emotion; the difference between his grandchildren arguing over Monopoly or being shouted at on the street, the sun on his face or the wind without a coat. He has no idea whether he is eating breakfast or supper or how to crack a walnut but loves good food and a glass of wine.

Somewhere in his mind he still has his hobbies from childhood, picking up a tennis racket, sketching a robin's head from a bird book, tying knots from his navy days with a piece of discarded ribbon. He is not raging into the night; at times he appears perplexed, at others frustrated but he is lucky in some ways that his has not been an angry, violent descent into Alzheimer's.

How did he come to have vascular dementia? No one yet knows what causes the mind to unravel in this way, there are no cures. Perhaps there are a few preventive measures: you are less likely to get dementia if you stay fit, sleep well and exercise the mind. Yet my father has always been very thin and can still walk for a mile at the age of 89; he loved quizzes, card games and chess.

Last month a major report from Harvard University showed that dementia is slowing down by up to 15 per cent per decade and suggested this could be partly due to the ban on lead in petrol 20 years ago. Is this perhaps how he got it? In the 1970s we lived by Chiswick Mall in west London, very close to the source of two motorways, the M3 and M4. One expert suggested it could have been the trauma he suffered during the war when he was sent to America and watched his mother die of tuberculosis. Perhaps it was hereditary? His father also had dementia in old age.

A survey this week shows that 38 per cent of people now want an early diagnosis 15 years before they have experienced any symptoms to see whether they could have inherited genes that predispose them to dementia. I can't see the point. I don't think my father would have lived his life any differently had he known in his fifties that he was likely to get the illness, he would just have worried. One in three babies born in Britain in 2020 will get some form of dementia; I don't want to know whether my mind might start slipping and sliding into old age but my father's condition has made me consider my options if I regularly start leaving the dog lead in the fridge.

I have often written about what the government should be doing to tackle the seemingly intractable problem of caring for people with Alzheimer's. A third of beds are taken up by dementia patients when hospitals are possibly the worse places for many of them.

Whenever my father is in hospital he recoils from the constant noise from other unhappy patients, the lack of sleep and his inability to articulate to strangers what he needs. But most can't live at home alone when the toaster becomes a death trap. Many of those with dementia are cared for by often elderly, increasingly exhausted partners and their offspring may not be able to visit regularly. Robots will not provide all the answers; those with dementia still need the reassurance of physical touch.

The government must decide on a better way to fund care for the elderly. But society also needs to rediscover how to make them feel included and we all need to work out a way to age, whether or not we eventually lose our minds. Solving a murder mystery is the solution in *Elizabeth is Missing*, one of my favourite books about dementia. In the BBC drama adaptation, Glenda Jackson portrays the elderly Maude as unreasonable, irascible and despairing, but also as warm, thankful and funny with her daughter.

Another bestseller about ageing, *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, by Yoko Ogawa, describes the relationship forged between an elderly Japanese maths professor who forgets everything after 80 minutes and his cleaner. He imbues the woman and her son with a love of numbers and in return they cherish him.

Olive, Again by Elizabeth Strout, *The Times's* novel of the year, shows the battle-axe Olive Kitteridge in her eighties trying to become "just a tiny bit better as a person" despite the indignities of old age and incontinence underwear, repairing her relationship with her son and forging friendships even in her old people's home.

Whenever I see my father, his presence reminds me not that I should be drinking less or worrying more about my own genetics but of his ability to connect. Whether we become physically or mentally impaired, we can still contribute in old age if we can somehow make the people we spend time with, relatives or strangers, feel loved and appreciated.

