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My Alzheimer's Dad

When the disease ravaged a father's mind, a son found a way to close the distance between them.

BY STEPHEN HENDERSON

AS THEIR MINDS unravel, people who suffer from Alzheimer's disease often surprise, even shock, their families when deeply hidden feelings and memories begin to surface. In his twilight, my father, who died from an Alzheimer's-related illness at age eighty-four this past April, revealed himself as indelibly marked by two things: being a World War II veteran and having a strong faith in God.

William Douglas Henderson was a father to five children (I'm the baby, with three older sisters and a brother), a Baptist min-

standard form, create your document with the help of an attorney, and make sure to get it notarized or otherwise made official according to your state's requirements, Fox says.

Get specific about Alzheimer's

Though a typical living will contains directions for care under life-threatening situations, when Alzheimer's is a concern you should also address questions about daily life that may surface as the disease progresses. For example, Sykes advises that you clarify if and when you believe you should enter a nursing home, when you would like someone to start making decisions on your behalf, and any wishes you have for the time after serious dementia sets in.

Be clear about circumstances in which different kinds of care would be acceptable. "Avoid blanket statements such as 'I don't want to be intubated,'" says Deirdre Wheatley-Liss, an elder-law attorney at Fein, Such, Kahn & Shepard, in Parsippany, New Jersey. "You may not want to be intubated for the long term, but if you are generally healthy and get stung by a bee and go into shock, you'll want this procedure if that's what it takes to save you." Explain your wishes clearly enough so that your appointed proxy can make decisions on your behalf with confidence, Wheatley-Liss adds.

Inform your family, friends and doctors

If you become incapacitated, no one should be surprised to find out you have a living will, or what it contains. So once you've completed the document, give copies to whoever may be involved in your care. "They may not agree with your directives, but they will probably accept them if you explain your decisions," Fox says. And don't stop there. Discuss your living will with your doctor, and be sure he understands your instructions.

KAREN HUBE

ister, a natural athlete and a lover of music who played a pretty funky trombone. A constant reader, he understood Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German and French. He'd memorized large portions of the Bible.

A loving parent, Dad also could be quite disengaged—something I found most frustrating as a child. I'd be yammering to him about a school play or a field trip, but he'd be brooding over a half-written sermon, a troubled parishioner or the wedding (or funeral) he'd soon preside over. His tendency to be distant only increased after Mom died, in 1988. Over the next decade, during which Dad met and married my stepmother, Alice, and subsequently began to suffer the earliest stages of Alzheimer's, I didn't notice much change in him. As usual, he appeared physically present, mentally not.

About six years ago, though, he began to show clearer signs of decline. Out walking Jake, his dog, Dad would get lost despite being only blocks from his home, in Hartford, Connecticut. He began to repeat his anecdotes over and over. As soon as a question was answered, he'd ask it again. And again. This was annoying, then vaguely amusing and, finally, sad.

So creepingly subtle were these changes, however, that Dad's Alzheimer's played tricks on my mind, too. I no longer recall any particular sequence to his symptoms; rather, it seemed that small problems slowly grew bigger. The phone rang, unanswered. Bills didn't get paid. He caused a fender bender, and we had to take away his car. He started to confuse furniture with the toilet.

At one point, Dad started to relive his experiences as a soldier in Italy and North Africa. We'd find him in the backyard, shovel in hand, digging a large hole. Before breaking camp, he calmly explained, it was standard practice to bury leftover munitions.

In 2004 we realized he could no longer live at home but needed the constant supervision of a managed-care facility we found nearby. Here he was well tended to but declined nonetheless. At times, he would refuse to eat. As happens with some Alzheimer's sufferers, Dad forgot how to swallow properly; it was saliva, collecting in his lungs and causing infection, that eventually killed him. Thankfully, before this occurred, Dad's anguished memories of war faded, and he seemed at peace.

He was no longer able to read but toted about his beloved Bible anyway. Curiously, he still remembered gospel hymns he used to play on his trombone, so we'd bring hymnals and sing to him. Dad didn't recognize us, his children, but he hummed along, smiling, as melodies flowed up from a safe space in his ravaged brain.

When younger, I was jealous that my father sometimes seemed more interested in the church than in me. This was all forgotten now. During those last, cloud-covered days, I was just happy to have found a way to bring him some sunshine.

10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's Disease

The Alzheimer's Association produced the following list, which appears on its Web site and in *Voices of Alzheimer's* (LaChance Publishing; \$16.95), a collection of stories by people whose lives have been touched by the disease.

Though it's normal to have some memory changes or fluctuations with age, it's not easy to distinguish between these and the earliest warning signs of Alzheimer's; therefore, experts suggest checking with a doctor if a loved one's daily functioning is affected.

1. Memory loss Forgetting recently learned information is an early sign of dementia. What's normal? Forgetting names or appointments occasionally.

2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks People with Alzheimer's often find it hard to plan or complete everyday activities. They may lose track of the steps involved in preparing a meal, placing a telephone call or playing a game. What's normal? Every once in a while forgetting why you came into a room or what you planned to say.

3. Problems with language People with Alzheimer's often forget simple words or substitute unusual ones. For example, if they can't find their toothbrush, they may instead ask for "that thing for my mouth." What's normal? Sometimes having trouble finding the right word.

4. Disorientation as to time and place Those with Alzheimer's can get lost in their own neighborhood, forget where they are and how they got there, and not know how to get home. What's normal? Being unable to recall the day of the week or where you were going.

5. Poor or decreased judgment Alzheimer's sufferers may dress inappropriately, wearing several layers on a warm day or little clothing in the cold. They may show bad judgment about money, such as by giving away large sums to telemarketers. What's normal? Making a questionable or debatable decision from time to time.

6. Problems with abstract thinking Someone with Alzheimer's may have unusual difficulty performing complex mental tasks. What's normal? Finding it challenging to balance a checkbook.

7. Misplacing things A person with Alzheimer's may put things in unusual places: an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl. What's normal? Temporarily misplacing keys or a wallet.

8. Changes in mood or behavior Someone with Alzheimer's may exhibit rapid mood swings—going from calm to tears to anger—for no apparent reason. What's normal? Occasionally feeling sad or moody.

9. Changes in personality Alzheimer's can dramatically alter a personality, making someone confused, suspicious, fearful or dependent. What's normal? Having your personality change somewhat with age.

10. Loss of initiative A person with Alzheimer's may become very passive, sitting in front of the TV for hours, sleeping more than usual or not wanting to do usual activities. What's normal? Sometimes feeling weary of work or social obligations.

Ledge

A curtain, descending over that lustrous mind,
That mind that drew rich laughter
from almost everything,
That mind now expressed as pinched face,
furrowed brow,
Clenched jaw all fighting to understand,
Synaptic wires trying to find databases,
swinging unplugged,
Her face desperate to connect.
My son? Yes, my son. Lives? Lives? In New York!
He lives in New York!

They call it Alzheimer's. I call it theft.
Does the door we open shed light on darkening self
Or throw too-harsh light on a befuddled present,
Forcing her to wonder who she is now?

Cancer, too, she has.
The crab escaping her removed ovaries
To unknown parts of her body.
They will poison the waters in which the crab swims
Trying to stop its relentless scuttling.

Together we seek a safe resting spot,
A place clear of Alzheimer's and crabs,
If only a ledge, a solid place,
(And if only for a little while),
A place where we can look at the
beautiful—but dimming—view
Or, now close, into each other's eyes:
Better, yes, now into each other's eyes
Close enough to smooth that clenched brow.

Is that not our task: to seek, seek and to find,
However narrow, that ledge?

—John A. Calhoun

John A. Calhoun is the founding president and CEO of the National Crime Prevention Council and the author of the just-published Hope Matters: The Untold Story of How Faith Works in America (Bartleby Press; \$23.50). He wrote this poem in memory of his friend Chris Webster.