Parent Care: Alzheimer's and the time left before that gentle good night

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

Saturday, March 11, 2006: The quiet after the storm: It's raining in San Diego ... finally ...

Water trickles down the spout and drops are still splattering from the eaves. It's soothing. I slept well, better than any night the past week. A warm glow, an inner peace fills me. I'm content and happy.

THE TIME THAT'S LEFT - Don Hayen, a retired dermatologist, is coping with Alzheimer's disease: 'I don't think this (disease) has stopped me in my tracks.' CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras.

It's a strange aftereffect of the news I received yesterday. I don't yet fully understand it, but after the first shock from the news that I had Alzheimer's and a moment of sadness and fear, this sudden wave of peace and serenity swept over me.

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Dr. Don Hayen, a retired San Diego dermatologist, is chronicling his dance with the dreaded Alzheimer's disease in a blog he calls "The Trip Over."

While it helps give him perspective in dealing with the disease, he hopes the journal also helps others. He said he's corresponded with people as far away as Lebanon and New Zealand.

The early signs that something was wrong with him were subtle, according to the 73-year-old.

"I was getting angry a lot. I would fly off the handle at the grandkids.

He also got lost driving down familiar streets.

His first thoughts after being diagnosed were of some of his shut-in patients "lying there like vegetables." Yes, he used to make house calls.

But the darkness didn't last.

"You can either just roll over and let it come or begin living your life because you're not dead," he said. After the diagnosis, Don and his wife, Jane, sold their four-bedroom home in Carlsbad, Calif, and bought a smaller one.

Ironically, there are pluses to Alzheimer's, according to Don. He said he's become more focused on what's important to him.

"I stay in contact with everybody I love," he said.

At first, he was afraid his friends might avoid him.

"But I was upfront, with a little humor." And they responded with their continued support.

"I still have my down times," Hayen admitted. "But I don't think this (disease) has stopped me in my tracks."

In fact, he's making tracks educating the public about this thing most people don't want to think about. Unfortunately, he pointed out, the incidence of Alzheimer's increases with age. About half of the people who reach 85 can expect to get it, he said. Statistics from the Alzheimer's Association confirm the fact.

"This catastrophe could be averted - with more research ... There's an answer out there."

For now, he emphasizes the value of early diagnosis.

"It makes all the difference to be prepared and plan the rest of your life," he said.

Knowing what he's up against, he wrote in his blog, "I've had time to prepare, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually for what is to come. I've adapted to living today, as if it is my last."

As soon as he started the medications, the anger stopped. As for brain function, "Relative to the world, I'm still in the normal range because I started out with a high intellect."

Hagen exercises his mind by doing Sudoku puzzles and writing - he's on his second novel. He exercises his

body doing water aerobics and playing golf.

The father of two and grandpa of six still drives - he doesn't get lost anymore - but said he'll quit as soon as he or others feel he's slipping.

He wrote in his blog, "It's strange, but being diagnosed with Alzheimer's has made a profound difference in me - for the better ... I'm gonna die? So what!"

He confided, "When I was younger, I was always waiting for or reaching for another goal, instead of living in the moment.

"I'm comfortable with where I'm at. I'm not preoccupied with something you can't control."

That's good advice for all of us.

NOTE: Hagen's most recent blog entries are on www.SanDiegoElderCare.com. Click on Dementia Journal at the top of the home page.

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