

Reaching the Unreachable: *Connecting with a Loved One Suffering from Alzheimer's*

One of the heartaches of living with a loved one suffering from Alzheimer's is the problem of meaningful communication. "It's so difficult to have a conversation with my dear one," we frequently hear people say when describing their struggle to retain some semblance of a normal relationship. I can fully relate to this situation since my wife is a victim of this dreaded disease.

The question arises, "Is there still a chance to maintain a mutually satisfying connection between caregiver and patient?" In my experience this can be done given a thorough understanding of the situation and utilizing knowledgeable sources of help, including that of our Lord Jesus, the Great Physician of body and soul.

The Problem

While each Alzheimer's patient has his unique strengths and weaknesses, there are many commonalities. The stage of dementia involved is a factor which must be considered. With the disease's progressive deterioration of your loved one's mental faculties the loss of communication, in normal terms, grows more acute. The diminishing capacity to understand what you are saying and the corresponding inability to respond verbally in a meaningful way greatly complicate effective "connecting with" your loved one.

A Solution

In seeking to achieve a mutually effective "give and take" with your loved one you must also consider the problems of attention span and level of comprehension. Spending quality time with her and carefully observing her reactions will greatly help you adjust your conversation accordingly. "Keep it simple" is a good rule to follow.

This does not mean, however, that you cannot penetrate these significant barriers to good communication with some encouraging expressions of your love and concern. Using God's Word is the key to connecting with your loved one. *With God all things are possible.* Or as St Paul tells us, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13).

The point here is that taking hold of your loved one's hand, speaking slowly in simple terms and sharing appropriate portions of God's Word will enable you to communicate with your dear one. The Holy Spirit works through the Word with our Lord's power penetrating all barriers!

Years ago the Lord revealed this to me in a most dramatic way while I was making hospital visitations. I was calling upon an elderly gentleman with whom I had visited the previous week and had a mutually satisfying devotion.

When I checked in at the nurse's station prior to my visit I was told that he had lapsed into a coma. The nurses cautioned that I would not be able to communicate with him under the circumstances. I paused for a moment and then responded saying, "We shall see. Let's leave this up to the Lord."

I then went into the man's room and greeted him as if things had not changed. Pulling up a chair beside his bed I took his hand and placed it on one of mine. I proceeded with a Bible reading and finished with a brief prayer.

When I completed the prayer this man who was still in a coma squeezed my hand to let me know that the Lord had reached him with His Word. I had not penetrated the veil but God had!

Guided by this memorable experience and numerous prayers I proceed with confidence when meeting with my wife. I build my visits around sharing God's Word, especially our favorite Psalms. This relaxes her and sharpens her focus. Her reactions vary: a nod, a smile, a word or two, or reaching out to touch me. There is not always a visible response, but still I know the Lord has reached her heart and we have connected.

Conclusion

If we prayerfully enlist the help of our Lord in visiting with our loved ones afflicted with Alzheimer's or other dementia type illnesses we can make these occasions ones for rejoicing and not emotionally wrenching experiences. In fact, we too shall be comforted by our Savior's Word as we share it with a loving spouse or parent. Tears may fill our eyes, but they will be tears of joy knowing that we are "reaching the unreachable"!