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Scary Movie

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

We were excited when our favorite movie house reopened early in Spring 2021. It had been over a year since we had watched a movie together on the big screen. We felt comfortable, as the place was nearly empty and the few folks there were all safely masked. There was almost a sense of giddiness in the air as we anticipated doing something “normal” after so many months.

But that elation was short-lived. We had gone to see *The Father* with Anthony Hopkins and it was so raw, so painful to watch I had to turn away at times. I was constantly shifting in my seat, wondering if I could make it to the end of the film. And I already knew how it would end. There couldn't be a happy ending to this searing depiction of the slow, inexorable descent into the advanced stages of dementia.

One of the inevitable consequences of practicing primary care medicine is that as you get older, your patients get older. The young ones come and go. They are more mobile. But the older ones tend to stick with you so that towards the end of your career you end up with a geriatrics practice whether you intended to or not. But in many ways this is comforting, this growing old together with people you've known for many years.

So, I've seen many cases of dementia but somehow I wasn't ready to face it in such a dramatic way as portrayed by the character Anthony, the father played by Anthony Hopkins. It was just too realistic. Spending fifteen or twenty minutes with one of my Alzheimer's patients and their family is not the same as spending an hour and a half with Anthony and his daughter Anne. It was scary.

My initial impression was just how horrible it is for the patient. Time and place and roles are scrambled. Am I living in my apartment or with my daughter? Why can't I go back to that comfortable house in the country that I remember so vividly from fifty years ago? Why is my little girl suddenly a middle-aged woman giving me orders?

But in the weeks and months since I saw the film my thoughts have mostly been about Anne, the daughter, the caregiver. In some ways, the images that have stayed with me are the ones of Anthony berating Anne for doing her job, for trying to make sure her father is secure and safe.

And I suspect that's what makes me so uncomfortable about the whole film, indeed about the whole ageing process. It's not so much what happens to me but my sense of the burden I might be to those I love. Will I ever be that belligerent geriatric patient lashing out with words meant to wound?

Surely they will know it's the pain, the fear, or the dementia that makes me talk like that. They will say, "It's okay." But it's not okay. It's a horrible situation, and I don't think we fully understand the burden on the caretaker. I certainly know I don't when I deal with my older patients and their families.

I was struck a few years back by the story of The Very Rev. [Tracey Lind](#). She is a retired Episcopal priest and the former dean of Trinity Cathedral in Cleveland, Ohio. When she was diagnosed with the early stages of dementia in 2016, she made it her mission to document her own decline in

talks she held around the country, including an interview almost three years ago on CBS's *60 Minutes*. Her spouse, Emily, now participates in these presentations in order to bring the crucial perspective of the caregiver. There is an attempt not only to explain dementia from the perspective of the patient, but to put it all into a frankly spiritual framework. She talks about dementia "from the inside out," and one of her mantras is "out of pain comes joy."

And they have a point. Surely, if we can see God at work in our everyday life – in our work, in our play, even in going about our day-to-day chores – then God is present with us as we age, just as God is with those who care for the ageing. But just because we can feel the presence of God doesn't make it easy. It's not. It's often a tragic experience, certainly for the person living with dementia, but especially for those who care for them.

As always, Scripture has something to say here, something directed in particular at the caregivers:

"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9)."

"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged (Deuteronomy 31:8)."

But still I wonder. Will I age with grace, or will I be the one who lashes out at the kids? Just in case, I've been going out of my way to be extra nice to them – no unsolicited advice on how to run their lives, paid off those student loans they accumulated, still pick up the tab at dinner – because you never know. I only wish I had as much faith in myself as I have in God.

You can view the May 5, 2019, *60 Minutes* segment [here](#) with The Very Rev. Tracey Lind and Emily, her spouse and caregiver.