



## ***A Story of Hope***

Sometimes we become so fully engaged in the role of “caregiver” to our aging relative that we forget what our original relationship was – whether it was spouse, child, sister, or another role. When this happens we may find that we don’t experience as much joy in caregiving as we once did...the joy in caregiving is usually closely connected to our relationship with the person for whom we are caring. Take away that relationship and it may start feeling more like a “job” rather than a “joy”!

In my article “He Got Better in the Nursing Home”, I described a phenomenon in which a person with dementia actually improves when he moves from living with his family to living in a skilled facility. This can be upsetting to the family who wonders if the person’s improved condition in the nursing home is an indication they did not provide adequate care when their loved one lived at home. In that article I reassured readers that was not true and explored the likely reasons for the person’s improvement in the nursing home.

Recently I worked with a caregiver who has experienced both of the situations described above. Her story is so heartening that I am sharing it here as inspiration for others in similar situations. Her Father, who has dementia, improved significantly once he moved to a skilled facility designed for people with dementia. He became more talkative again, his mind was a bit clearer, and he became calmer and more jovial; the change was astonishing to both her and her Mother.

Until he moved into the nursing home, her Mother had been her Father’s main caregiver. As his condition declined she tried to keep him clean, happy, and safe. He had become incontinent and would often refuse to wear the adult diapers her Mother bought for him. Often her Mother was exhausted at the end of the day (or the middle of the day!) from trying to get him to take a shower or wear the adult diapers. The daughter told me that her Father often had an odor of urine even though her Mother was doing everything she could to keep him clean. Her Mother’s exhaustion was one of the major reasons they moved her Father into a nursing home.

Today the daughter told me she is thrilled by the fact her parents can again be “husband and wife” - a relationship that had been overshadowed by the caregiving role. She told me how her Father is once again loving and sweet with her Mother; complimenting her on her appearance, concerned that she is alright – all the things he had done prior to needing his wife to care for him. And in turn, her Mother doesn’t have to spend her time cajoling her husband to take a shower or put on adult diapers. The staff at the nursing home now does the care and she can visit and just enjoy her husband’s company. The daughter welled up as she described for me how wonderful it is to watch them together now that they again enjoy being husband and wife.

To me this story is a wonderful illustration of how beneficial it can be for everyone in the family NOT to keep a family member at home when the person needs more intensive supervision and care than can be provided by the family. It is often the most loving thing we can do for someone with dementia or someone with physical care needs that exceed the family’s comfort level.

Additionally, this story reinforces the need to rekindle our original relationship with our aging relative – whether they are at home with their family or in a nursing home. It is that relationship that brings meaning and joy to the caregiving role...and we have to carefully guard against that being tarnished in the face of our caregiving duties. I believe that with the right support caregiving can be transformational and joyful. This story is a wonderful example of one family’s triumph in finding that joy and transformation.

Dr. Amy