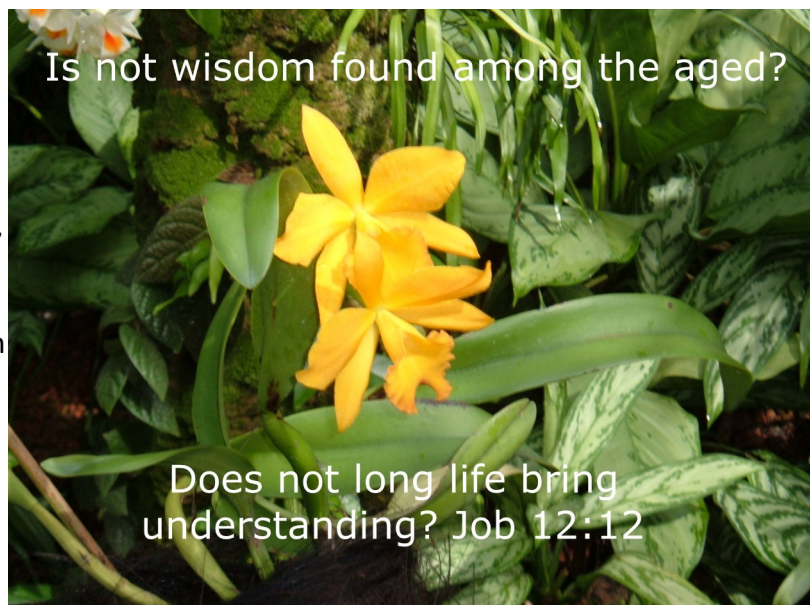


## Care 'n' Share

I have been a pastoral carer coming up 20 years. During that time I have heard many stories, family secrets, family scandals, stories of love, of misunderstandings, funny stories of family members. The residents of the retirement village-nursing home, dementia specific unit, as well as independent living units have all presented me with a unique and beautiful gift – that of giving me their trust, shared their heartache, shared their pride and happiness with family, and sometimes shared with me something that has been worrying them for years, not even their immediate families know. As you would all know, pastoral carers visits are confidential – trust between resident and carer must be ever present and once that trust has been developed and kept, folk receiving pastoral care visits will share their deepest worries, long held guilty secrets, regrets and sadness, happiness and delight and know their stories are safe.

Communicating with the aged – I have found that once folk have put a few questions to you and feel they know something of your history that you are accepted and trusted totally. Often you are asked do you go to church, which church, as some residents mix up pastoral carers with those who want to convert them to the carer's religion, but once it is explained that we are there solely for companionship and caring, they will drop their guard, and then sometimes ask if you would pray for them at the end of a visit. That is a huge step and one which shows their trust in their pastoral carer.

One visit stands out vividly in my mind from around 8 years ago. The lady concerned had a huge family, and was often troubled by whatever was the latest catastrophe amongst them. As we do, I would sit with her, and simply listen to her airing her worries, watching her all the time to let her know she was the only person I was 'with' in presence and mind. She would always ask me to pray for the family as I was leaving. This particular visiting day I knew an important phone call would be coming on my mobile, one I was actually dreading for I knew it would not have good news, and so I asked her if she would mind if I kept my mobile on whilst visiting her, explaining its importance. Of course she was happy for me to do so. Eventually the call came, and my worst fears were realized. She had been sitting quietly whilst I was on the phone, but when it was ended and I spoke with her, my voice must have given me away for she immediately said, "You just sit there and let me make you a cup of tea, for today I am going to be your pastoral carer and look after you." She made me a cuppa and found a biscuit to go with it, then sat next to me, patting my arm. What a wonderful loving gift. I have never forgotten that.



Family asked me to speak at her funeral and I included this incident in my talk. Some months later I met up with one of her daughters, and she told me she had told this story so many times about her mother – a loving, caring woman whose 'gift' to me was one of love and care.

I visited a bed ridden 90 year old lady who had two sons of whom she was so proud. I knew all about them as on each visit she would tell me bring them into the conversation. She was ailing, and then one afternoon I received phone call from one of her sons to tell me she was in hospital and asked if I would like to visit her. Of course I said Yes, and so details of her location were given me. When I arrived at her bedside, her 'boys' told me they would give us time together, and they would sit in the gardens just outside her room and speak with me then. At the end of my visit I joined them, and we started talking. They were interested in pastoral care, and so I outlined what I did briefly. Then one of them said "I don't know why Mum is 'hanging on. We have told her that it is ok for her to go, that we understand, but still she lingers." I mentioned that sometimes dying folk are waiting for some resolution or problem to be sorted, so they can go in peace, when one son looked at the other and just said "I am going to ring him tonight and get this thing sorted'. Just that. The evening of the next day I received a son's phone call to say that their Mum had died that afternoon. Her boys had given her some news that morning and evidently that was why she was clinging to life, for once resolved, she was able let go and die peacefully.

With my visits to another dear little lady of 90 plus, I knew what to expect each time. Greetings over, she would inspect me from head to toe, and then tell me what was wrong with the way I had dressed. (She was employed by one of the 'big' stores in Sydney many years ago, and knew all about fashion). I thought I had looked pretty good for my age when I left home!, but listened to her advising me with good grace and told her I would endeavour to look more fashionable for my next visit. She had done a lot of embroidery when young, and had a cushion on her bed, the cover of which had been worked by her a long time ago. Whilst she was talking to me I glanced at the cushion and was secretly admiring her handiwork when I heard her voice "Am I boring you?" Pastoral care rule – Do not let your attention wander from the person you are visiting, look at them and do not get distracted..... So I apologised profusely but added that I was admiring her beautiful handiwork, and so all was forgiven, and my visit resumed its pleasant time- together mode.

A dementia specific unit can be hard to visit initially, but as you approach your lady to spend time with her, you are greeted with a big smile and outstretched arms. She probably has no idea of my name, of how long since my last visit, but I am treated as a special friend. Communication was in going for a walk within the surrounding garden, touching the petals of a beautiful flower, smelling a rose, feeling the leaves of a shrub and sitting on a garden seat looking at the beauty all around. I also visited another two ladies, each had been teachers, each loved music, and each found friendship with the other. Many a visit has been spent with them, one on each arm, walking along the corridors of their particular unit, and we would sing, all the golden oldies of yesteryear, Abide with me, Silvery moon, Abbadabbahoneymoon, and the like, and 'the girls' enjoyed every moment, and what's more, knew all the words to all the songs, that was more than I did.



Communicating with oldies – does not necessarily mean with words.....again, years later I visited another lady (a dear friend this time) with dementia. She could not settle, but roamed along the corridors of her unit. So to visit, when I would meet up with her in the corridor, we would stop and have a little chat, that meant my listening to whatever she was saying, whether it made sense or not, and then she would leave to walk some more. I would meet her 3-4 times of a morning as I visited different rooms, and we would resume our talks.

As I was leaving one morning, coming up close to lunch time, I met her again, and this time told her I was going and would see her next week. "Would she like a hug?" Yes. So very gently I put my arms around her and she nestled her head in the side of my neck. Touch is an important way of communicating. One morning after my hugging her, I noticed that a group of ladies had gathered ready to go into the dining room for lunch, but were watching us. Then a nurse came over to me and said that the ladies there wanted to know if I would give them a hug too.....of course I did, one by one. These are the rewards one gains from being a pastoral carer – of the giving of ourselves to others, we reap so much in return.

In the dining room of the dementia specific one lunch time I walked with another my ladies to her table, and she picked up her bib and put it on over her head. She then noticed that I did not have one, and so gathered up one still on the table, and put it gently over my head, telling me that one was for me. Of course I was not going to take it off in front of her, but thanked her, and when she was seated I slipped away round the corner, took it off, and then came back to her table, saying, Oh here is a protector for this lady. By then my resident had forgotten I had been there, let alone having put a 'bib' on me,' but the caring action of the moment was so very touching.

I had been asked to visit an older lady who had never married, had led a sheltered life being home schooled because she was a 'sickly' child, and because of this had not much of anything I could talk about with her. She had never worked, her family (siblings) had looked after her, but of course had their own lives and families to take up most of their time. It became rather difficult to talk with her on any subject apart from 'the birdies' – the native birds who would come around her patio door looking for bits and pieces. One interruption to my visit would be when it was sheet changing day, and she would watch the girls doing this with great impatience. As soon as they had gone, she would pull the bed to pieces,. and make it up HER way, which could take ages. By accident one day I mentioned some sporting event that had taken up the news time on TV and she suddenly 'came to life' knew all about the scores and the player. So....every Sunday night I would watch the 'sports report' and we would have a lovely discussion on this on Monday mornings. Prior to this, I had been getting desperate as to how I could communicate with her, and whether she really wanted to see me, but I was running late one particular Monday morning

---

when I tapped on her door. She flung it open, and greeted me loudly with "YOU'RE LATE" It took me a few seconds to register that she was not mad with me, but that she had been waiting for me, and thought I would not see her that day. We then had a lovely time discussing sports.....

I so often hear the story of how some ladies feel they have been 'dumped' into care, bemoaning how they have not been allowed to bring their treasures and how they just know that their daughters/daughters in law etc. will just give everything away or hire a skip. What to them are treasures spread over a lifetime often associated with a story, to the family these 'treasures' are not worth much, and are often just given away or thrown out. They are so very bitter and the feeling of being dumped very strong. By simply listening to the 'girls' as we fondly call them, talking about it all, getting it 'all off their chests' so to speak makes them feel as if folk do care, and gradually the bitterness and sometimes the memories too, fade, and peace comes into their lives. And with their families coming to visit acceptance and peace come into their lives. This is exactly what has happened with a dear 95 year old I visit, some of her family treasures went back to when she was married, at 16 in Italy, and then migrated to Australia, where she and her husband raised 6 children. She just knew that her treasures had been given away by her eldest daughter, and things were very touchy for some time, but slowly the turnaround has taken place, and now she and her daughter are 'friends' once more - someone to listen and sympathise, to hold her hand when she got upset, and just 'be there for her' was enough. Also she has had time to reflect on how her health is, and how she cannot be bothered even thinking about cooking etc. She is allowed so much 'pocket money' by her daughter each week or so, to be able to purchase from the tuck shop the boiled sweets she loves and enough left over for bingo afternoons. So all is now well!

Jan Lepherd

---