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The Awesome Power of Faith Helps Us Endure

By Joan McCain

UCF Forum columnist

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A mixture of Irish and Belgian heritage is what my stepdad used to explain his enormous stubborn streak. My mother, his wife of 21 years, was the only one who could talk sense into him when he reached an impasse with anyone. It was a character flaw in an otherwise kind, hard-working, loving man.

We called him “Popsie,” and after my mother died he was alone. Alone in the house they shared, more than an hour away from me, more than three hours away from my brother, John. Fifteen years my junior, John was my half-brother, inheriting our mother’s sense of humor and, thankfully, none of his dad’s Belgian-Irish obstinance.

From the time my mother died, I asked Popsie to move closer to me. The answer was always the same: “No. I like my house.”

It became more worrisome, and my moving suggestions became more urgent after his retirement. He had no friends, and his social contact became non-existent. His isolation and the accompanying worry it caused me were solidified when years of forgetfulness were diagnosed as dementia.

Still, he would not talk of moving. His mental condition worsened every year, and my anxiety grew every month. I envisioned car accidents, a stove left on, leaving a grocery store and not being able to find his car. Popsie would not budge. Eventually, I stopped asking because I knew he was too stubborn to submit to the idea on his own, and eventually I was sure a bigger force would intervene.

The slippery slope began with his inability to decipher a bank statement and relinquishing his bill-paying to John. Soon after, he began to have delusions. He would call, convinced he was in a motel in Georgia, and we had to come get him.

John and I had panicked phone conversations, and began researching foreign concepts to us like durable power of attorney and guardianship.

Before we were ready, a call came from a family friend, “Come now. He’s never to be left alone again.” He had driven to her office and had an episode in front of her. This, I realized, was what we were waiting for.

I raced over, but all I wanted to do was turn around. He didn’t fight. He packed a bag with a few basics and said, “Tell me what to do.” I drove him back to my house, thankful but still trembling.

Popsie would go to bed at midnight, awake at 5 a.m. The first morning, he greeted my husband of nearly 20 years with a bear hug, and said, “Tell me your name again.” I couldn’t fathom his confusion. I wept in my bed each night for the loss of the man who raised me.

To keep him occupied, one day I took him on a long drive to the old places we knew: the apartment we lived in as our first house was being built, the restaurant where he met and danced with my mother. He remembered and together we enjoyed the stories of our shared history. This, I would learn, is what they call a good day.

By day five, I had talked to friends with aging parents, and gathered a great deal of advice. I learned the value of a detailed, printed schedule. *6 a.m. Coffee and crossword puzzle. 7 a.m. Cereal and pills. 8 a.m. Shower.* It worked like magic. While he was occupied, my brother, his wife, and I had banged out a plan.

John found an assisted living facility with a memory center 10 minutes from his house he could move his dad into it without guilt. What we thought was impossible was no longer.

On the day Popsie was to leave my house, I added *9:30 a.m. Leave to meet John* to his schedule. He was showered, shaved, packed and ready to go. “Check my bag,” he said very child-like, swallowing his pride, so I could be sure he got everything. After I retrieved my phone, TV remote control, and proofs of my wedding photos that were under his toiletries, I told him he did a great job, and we hit the road.

John was waiting for us at a half-way point. I put him in John’s car in the parking lot of a Denny’s in Haines City. “Bye, Pops,” I said as I kissed his cheek. “John found you a great place.” My cheeks were damp as John and his dad turned onto the interstate. Now he would be safe. Relief, sweet and warm, swept over me like a blanket.

Then I climbed into my car, turned the key, and said a prayer of thanksgiving for the awesome power of faith.

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