

## ON AGING

It's been almost a year since Mom turned 80. Now it's Dad's turn, exactly a year later. Aging is one of those things we all do whether we want to or not. It is always hoped that we can do so gracefully, as they say. Dad says that when he goes, he wants to go like *his* parents did—suddenly, and not spend any time wasting away in a care home facility. I remind him that his mother spent several years in such care facilities and his Dad went earlier, avoiding the time when such care would be needed.

There's a lot Dad doesn't remember. He doesn't remember why he has to take that little pill—the one for his memory. He doesn't remember that those Dickies he's wearing are the same ones he wore yesterday, and the day before that and the day before that. He doesn't remember that it's not okay to wear those same Dickies to the temple. Dr. Lowe is afraid that Dad will forget his way home, so he's taken away his license. Dad says he might as well die if he can't drive. He's the patriarch of the family and as the patriarch, he is to drive. Mom takes away his keys. Mom drives now. Dad drives from the other seat.

The brain is a strange thing. When we enter into this world it needs development. It matures faster in some than in others and then deteriorates faster in some too. In such a decline, it seems that in old age we sometimes revert to ways of a way younger self. We become like autistic children who are quite bright in some areas but extremely lacking in others and whose lives follow various patterns of behavior such as conforming to a rigid schedule. Dad is like that. He has his schedule and it has to be maintained. He is up at 7:00 every morning, drinks the ritual eggnog that he makes from scratch, then goes to the computer room and plays FreeCell most of the day. One day he asked me if he had ever shown me how to play FreeCell. I told him,

“no.” At 11:00 he used to drive to the post office. Now Mom drives him to the post office. He picks up the mail, then comes home. At 12:00 he makes lunch of a pre-packaged salad and half a sandwich, eats two cookies for dessert, then goes back into the computer room until suppertime. If I call, he answers the phone, but turns it over quickly to Mom. He doesn't recognize my voice until I introduce myself, and I can't understand his, his slurred speech has become so bad. The doctor has done various tests, but so far he says it's just part of the dementia. At 6:00 he eats dinner of whatever Mom fixes, then does the dishes. He has a system for that. When the whole family is home, Dad still does the dishes by himself. He doesn't want anybody to disturb his system. After supper, it's back to the computer and FreeCell. 9:00 is bedtime. We never hear or see him go, we just know by the time.

A couple of years ago I asked Dad to help me make videos for the weddings of two of our children. We wanted pictures of their childhood and growing up along with pictures of those of their soon-to-be spouses. Dad had made hundreds of such videos over the years including the video he made of his professional life, which begins with his work in radio, before TV came into play. It traces the history of television and the work he did in its evolution and culminates with the engineering he did on television switchers and computer programs to check out those switchers. Highlighting his career was the trip he took to the Lake Placid Olympics to oversee the installation of a switcher he designed for use in televising the games. Now all I wanted was a simple wedding video. We assembled all the photos we had collected over the years in order from youngest to oldest and alternated between pictures of our children and their soon-to-be spouses. Dad hooked up the electronic equipment and recorded the pictures onto video. We were excited to see the result.

Nothing was recorded. Our afternoon of work showed no results. Dad checked the connections, but didn't know what went wrong. He eventually found another way to complete the job, but I knew that Dad's mind was not what it used to be.

The first time I remember pondering what it was like to be old was when Mom's Aunt Lula was almost 80. I never met Aunt Lula before I got married and moved to Canada. She lived in Cardston, Alberta, on the edge of the Blood Indian Reservation. Mom had come to help me with the birth of one of our children. We visited Aunt Lula and she asked us if we had attended the Indian pow-wow that weekend. We told her "no." She said that she did just so she would be able to "converse with others on the subject." She could converse with others on about any subject, and did so. She was so alive. She was my friend, like someone my age, or maybe a few years older, but never like someone 50 years my senior. I remember thinking at the time that she was like a 25-year-old trapped inside an 80-year-old body. I thought of how it must be to get old and want to do things that your body won't let you do. Aunt Lula was well under 5 feet tall and hunched over. Her legs swelled with the water that she retained making her often uncomfortable. She never complained. She attended every cultural event that came to town and often bought tickets for us to attend with her. She died at 94. The funeral

service was held in the same building where she stood only a year earlier to speak at her granddaughter's missionary farewell where she feistily fought off skirt tugging attempts to get her to cut her speech short.

Edward Hoagland said, "The forties are the old age of youth and the fifties are the youth of old age," so whether I like to admit it or not, I guess I'm old age in its youth. I try to cover it up. Miss Clairol helps me out a bit. They advertise that StriVectin is supposed to be better than Botox at getting rid of the wrinkles, so I pay the \$60 an ounce to see. The girl at the make-up counter in Macy's tells me to take a picture of my face before so that I'll be able to tell the difference, because it is so subtle. I think that if I won't be able to tell the difference without a photo, how will anyone else? I buy it anyway and don't take the picture.

This year we became grandparents. Everyone says that's the best. And having grandchildren IS the best, but I was sort of hoping it would happen before I looked so much like one. I still don't feel like one, or at least how I thought it would feel to be that old. My husband looks at the picture on the computer screen of him holding Preston as a newborn. He wonders: "who is that old guy?" His little friend, Emily, tells him, "You have bumps on your forehead." He says, "So do you." She says, "No I don't! I'm still little!"