

THE PLAY

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(Telephone conversation on a Monday during the fall.)

Daughter: Hello.

Dad: Hi Chrissy.

Daughter: Hi Dad.

Dad: I need your help. Can you help me with a play?

Daughter: A play?

Dad: Yes. I need you to fill a hole.

Daughter: What do you mean?

Dad: I'm working on a play and I need you to fill a hole. Can you help me?

Daughter: Sure.

Dad: Good. You know where we practice, right?

Daughter: I think so, where is it?

Dad: You know, by the park in Cascade. Can you be there tomorrow morning at 9:30?

Daughter: Yeah.

Dad: Good. You should just wear blue jeans, a sweat shirt and tennis shoes because it will be muddy.

Daughter: O.K.

Dad: Thanks, I'll see you tomorrow morning.

Daughter: I'll be there. Bye Dad.

Dad: Bye honey.

At the time of this conversation, my dad was still living at his home with my mom. We knew he was struggling with Alzheimer's or some other type of dementia, but it was all still new to us.

He was still experiencing times when he was living in the present, aware of his surroundings and the events of the day. Of course, with time his condition became worse and it was eventually necessary for him to live in an assisted living home on a locked floor which was for people with similar conditions. At the time of the telephone conversation my dad had started to often talk about the past as if it were the present. When I answered the call and my dad first stated he needed help with a play, I thought he meant a theatrical play since he acted when he attended Ottawa Hills High School in Grand Rapids.

Yet once he added that he needed for me to "fill a hole," I immediately realized he was talking about football. My dad was the quarterback in high school. When I was growing up during the 1960s and 1970s my dad and I would typically watch a couple of professional football games together on Sundays. We would discuss the plays selected and he taught me how to evaluate how they were executed.

When I hung up the telephone, I concluded that he would probably forget about "the play" well before the next morning. Yet I was not certain since I was still learning about the symptoms and patterns of people with Alzheimer's and dementia. Even though it was a work day for me, the next morning I arrived at my parents' house at 9:30, wearing blue jeans, a sweatshirt, and tennis shoes. My dad answered the door surprised and happy to see me stating, "Chrissy, I didn't know you were coming over. Come on in." My mom asked why I wasn't working and I explained that I had some time and stopped by for a visit.

This incident provided a valuable lesson. On one level, his call was emotionally devastating. The call provided evidence that my dad's condition extended beyond forgetfulness or confusion during a conversation. I had to mourn the fact that I would no longer be able to have the type of intellectual discussions that we previously enjoyed. More importantly, this meant that my dad, a retired judge and World War II veteran who was a defense attorney for Japanese soldiers accused of war crimes, was losing his ability to enjoy life by doing what he loved – reading, learning and discussing history, politics, current events, and the events in the lives of those he loved.

Upon further reflection however, the conversation had the proverbial silver lining. My dad was in his element during our telephone conversation. He was working on a productive goal. In his mind he was either a coach or quarterback thinking about the next day's practice, roles that he enjoyed. There was a specific play he wanted to work on and he thought that I would be able to fill a hole which was needed to perfect a play. He thought I could help, located and called my telephone number, explained what he needed and when we ended the call he was pleased that he met his objective.

The telephone call was analogous to a child engaging in make-believe play. For the child, play which is done in a safe, supervised environment is a form of creative engagement which is healthy, enjoyable and educational. As adults we all engage in play in the form of games, hobbies and various social activities. Of course without dementia, we are aware it is play and can move seamlessly between play and the other aspects of our lives.

Yet given my dad's condition at the time, and having witnessed his pain during the times he was acutely aware of his decline, the telephone call and my visit the next day was a brief opportunity for joy. While he was planning the practice, and during our telephone conversation, we were engaging in a form of play that related to an activity we previously enjoyed together. At least during that brief time, he was finding satisfaction and not focused on his disease. Of course, I was also flattered that I was on his team roster.

Another lesson for me was that there is no reason to try to correct a person with dementia who is engaged in a harmless activity or has an incorrect understanding about specific facts. If the activity or words do not create danger or harm anyone, it is valuable to let the person stay in their moment, whether they are coaching a football team or directing a Broadway production of South Pacific.

This experience also allows me to express my wishes should I ever have to live with this disease. If at some time in the distant future, I call you to plan my tennis strategy in my upcoming Wimbledon match against Arthur Ashe, do not tell me that Arthur died in the 1990s or that I have neither the talent nor health to win my assisted-living center's tournament. Instead, encourage me to rush the net and hit to Arthur's weak side.

When you visit me and I think you are President Eleanor Roosevelt seeking my advice about whether we should use a newly developed secret weapon to end the war with Japan, do not waste our precious time trying to convince me that Eleanor was never president. Instead, I will expect you, being the President, to direct your Secret Service contingent to clear my room while we talk.

Finally, be sure to listen carefully and do not presume you already know my advice. My dad was born in 1916 and never wore or cared for denim blue jeans. That telephone call was the first and only time my dad told me that he

wanted me to wear jeans.
