

Notes on Rick Naymark's book *Alzheimer's Gifts: How Caring for Someone with Alzheimer's Brought Unexpected Blessings* (2016). Gentili Press.

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I believe that this inspiring book could be very useful to many family care partners of older people living with Alzheimer's disease. Rick describes the deep and varied personal meanings he experienced while supporting and caring for his mother Shirley who lived with the disease for eight and a half years. He did so despite the extremely painful losses he experienced throughout her disease progression.

One of the themes in the book is the fact that elements of reciprocal (as opposed to solely unidirectional) relationship can be realized by family care partners well into the advanced stages of the disease. This, if family members can work on what is often the hardest task of continuously engaging emotionally with and accepting the losses at each step, transition, decline in function, and stage of the disease. It also helps tremendously when families are connected with and receive outside professional help with direct care in the later stages of the disease and that they have the financial means and government supports to do it.

This little book addresses a fairly large number of important issues and "unexpected gifts" in caring for and supporting a parent with Alzheimer's disease such as learning to accept the cognitive changes and diagnosis as well as areas where comfort, sense of calmness, and moments of joy could be experienced. These include (1) Early life shared memories; (2) Cherished holiday memories; (3) Learning to be fully present in the moment (including the appreciation of being in complete and prolonged silence with your loved one); (4) Moments of coherence in the later stages of the disease; (5) The healing value and calming effects of listening to personally meaningful music and dance; (6) The calming effects of touch (e.g., hugs, gentle strokes, and kisses; when the person likes and wants it); (7) The helpful reframing of intense anger and behavioral expressions (such as hitting) in the context of lifelong personality ("Mom still imagined she was in charge") and need to maintain a sense of control over her care; (8) Validating the person's internal reality (as opposed to insisting on bringing them back to our reality); (9) Finding comfort in the person's presence; (10) The value of seeing the core, essential self, and soul of the person when the lifelong masks fall in many individuals with the disease; (11) Remembering the person's rich life experiences and their lifelong religious beliefs as a source of strength; and (12) The realization and expression of love bonds well into the disease progression ("We were connected by love"). This, including the possibility of strengthened love to one's parents ("Her deterioration had the unexpected effect on me of increasing my love for her and strengthening our bond"). While this is not always the case with other individuals living with Alzheimer's disease, it is not an uncommon experience.

In addition, Rick reframes substantial memory loss as having protective effects on individuals living with the disease (e.g., "It made her journey easier for her"). Furthermore, he had the wisdom and courage to face his mother's dying process and has found deep personal meaning and value in the process.

The book also provides descriptions of the life at a long-term care home for people living with dementia (where his mother lived) including detailed descriptions of other residents as well as the importance of close friendships between residents. He also addresses an important but often overlooked area in care for this population in long-term care homes – the moral and practical value of developing and nurturing close trusting and supportive relationships between visiting family members and direct care staff members (based on deep appreciation of their hard and dedicated daily work).

The book is organized around short chapters, each describing practically useful insights related to a distinct “unexpected gift” along with concrete real life examples for illustration.

I found Rick to be a great writer. Very personable. He succeeded in taking a complicated and emotionally charged topic and skillfully made it into an easy and even enjoyable read.

In short, the book does an excellent job in instilling hope and finding meaning and moments of joy in the face of deep emotional pain caused by the gradual loss of a close parent living with a cognitive disability. In Rick’s words, “As a caretaker, what had began as a burden now ended full of blessings.” Rick’s early decision to focus primarily on his mother’s remaining abilities (strength-based approach) seem to have helped her and him tremendously during her last years of her life.

Professor Arthur Kleinman, Harvard Medical School, cared for his wife with Alzheimer’s disease. Several years after she died he published the article *The Art of Medicine: Caring for Memories* (2016) in the journal *The Lancet*. He writes, “Caregiving doesn’t end with the death of the care-receiver.” Kleinman encourages family members to intentionally reflect on the lifelong cherished memories of their loved ones with dementia. In his words,

“This is the gift of memories, even those that haunt and hurt. They bring caregiving right into the centre of our lives, offering the opportunity to affirm and acknowledge who we are, including even those parts of ourselves that are troubled or broken.” He adds, “We can and do learn from these memories, especially when we face them and critically self-reflect on them.” He explains, “Left to themselves, however, memories can work their own way through us with unexpected and undesired consequences like inappropriate emotional reactions.” He concludes his article by stating, “We can do an appropriate or inadequate job of caring for these memories. My intention is...to help each of us to confront this usually silent caring.”

Rick Naymark “re-membered” his mother out of this silence into the center of our life when he lovingly and tenderly “cared for her memories.” *The Alzheimer’s Gifts* is a precious, practically useful, and spiritual gift for close family members supporting and caring for a relative living with the disease and other forms of dementia. As importantly, it is a gift for professional care partners supporting and caring for these underserved and vulnerable individuals in the community and long-term care homes.