

I have noticed people doing it while visiting an older person whose mind is not as good as it once was. And I have shuddered each time wondering how the older person felt, suspecting that, despite their limited capacities, they could still feel being ignored and rejected. I have been so moved by this behavior, that on occasion I have gently reminded the offending person of what I had witnessed. Then the other day I found myself on the short end of the stick. I found myself doing exactly what gets me so riled up when others do it. To my dismay the older person, who has dementia and often exhibits an inability to comprehend what is going on around her, called me to task.

What happened? What is this behavior? It is acting as if the person with limited mental capacity doesn't need the same respect everyone else does. It is often easier to walk by the person in this situation, rather than smile or engage in contact. It is often easier to talk to someone else in the room than to the person so affected. "After all they don't understand and cannot follow the conversation!" On this particular day I was at the Wicke Health Center, where I work, and wanted to make an appointment with the activity director. She was busy! I was busy! I needed to clear a date on her calendar and 'needed' to do so that day. She was busy manicuring the nails of this woman at whom I smiled and then proceeded to engage the activity director in conversation. After a couple of minutes of this, the woman said, "Hey, this is my time with Mary!"

She was absolutely correct! I was absolutely wrong! Not being able to understand or follow a conversation does not mean being unable to 'feel.' She may not have understood everything that was happening around her, but she certainly sensed that she was being ignored. I have noticed people in such condition often have a heightened ability to 'sense' what is happening in their environment. I needed the reminder! Anyone who cares for older adults, especially those with diminished mental capacity, needs the reminder.

All people deserve to be noticed and treated with utmost respect. I know first hand how difficult it is to remain aware of this, but I also know firsthand that not to do so is to perform a disservice. As difficult as it is caring for, providing ministry, to such a person requires as much interaction as possible. For those with dementia, I have noticed family members and care givers using a variety of tools to do so. A couple of them really seem to work. Some bring old family albums or pictures, often evoking smiles and conversation as familiar thoughts and feelings rise to the surface. Some play old favorite records or tapes and sing along with their loved one. Others read familiar passages of Scripture or parts of books that the person has loved. None of them are perfect tools, not all of them work for everyone, but they all point to a central requirement of ministry with older adults, especially those with diminished mental capacities. All of them point to sensitivity to entering the world of the one who often seems "so far away."

It is hard work sometimes, but the reward of doing so is great.

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