

Slipping into His World

By: Tim Ramsey

Family Fun Night had been a success as hundreds of kids and their parents intermingled with the staff, enjoying the craft booths, book fair, choir and band performances in the amphitheater, and barbecue dinner. For me, the assistant principal of the school, this was an added responsibility I had to fulfill despite the fact that it was now nearly eight o'clock in the evening and I had been at work since six-thirty that morning. I was joking with a group of eighth grade boys when my cell phone started ringing. I excused myself from the merriment and headed to the office to take the call in silence.

"Tim!" my youngest sister exclaimed the second I answered. "Dad is out of control! He is yelling and screaming at Mom! He's been doing it for almost an hour! He won't stop! Can you come over and help?"

We had been told a few months earlier that Dad was afflicted with semantic dementia, but the deterioration of his mind had been gradually taking place for a few years prior to that diagnosis. The language center of his mind was slowly being erased. Once an avid reader, he could no longer understand the symbols upon the written page. Lost also was his ability to make sense of his world and, eventually, to convey complete thoughts while speaking. Most heartbreaking of all was the memory loss that obliterated his past and all that it encompassed - including his life with his wife and seven children.

Dad had never been aggressive, but my sister now sounded frightened. "Are you and Mom safe?" I asked.

He's just going on and on and getting louder and louder," she replied. "We're worn out, and Mom looks like she's going to cry. Can you please come help?"

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," I hollered as I rushed to the parking lot and jumped into my car.

Dad was still on a rant as I entered the house he had shared with Mom since 1969 when the Air Force transferred him to Arizona. Mom was sitting quietly with my sister and younger brothers as Dad shouted, "The general is not going to be happy with this! This is unacceptable!"

"Calm down, Dad," I said quietly. Quickly, I moved into assistant principal mode and racked my brain for the best way to de-escalate the situation. "Just relax," I urged. "Why don't you sit down?"

Not recognizing his first-born son, Dad continued to yell. "This woman has been having an affair! The general is not going to be happy! I do not want to be a part of this! She has been having an affair!"

"Dad..." I pleaded. "Neither one of you ever gets out of the house! Mom has been right here by your side taking care of you for over fifty years!"

"Sir," he replied, "I know you mean well, but you don't know what you are talking about! She is having an affair! I just want to get out of this office and be done with this!"

Nothing we could say could sway Dad as he continued to yell for almost an hour more. He was stuck in some long-forgotten base command center from the sixties fearing the opinion of his superior officer.

Exhausted, I decided I had to enter that office myself. "Sergeant!" I barked. Dad snapped to attention.

"Sergeant!" I repeated. "Go down the hall, take your medicine and go to bed...NOW!"

Amazingly, he followed orders.

I stayed the rest of the evening, sleeping on my parents' couch. In the morning, I called the school secretary to let her know I was not coming in. When Dad awoke, he was in better spirits and had no recollection of the events of the previous night. His first words to me: "I want to go home."

"Dad, you are home," I answered.

"This place is nice," he mused, "but I really want to move all of my stuff and go home."

I slipped into his foggy world for a moment and replied, "Okay, Dad. I don't have my truck today, but I can come back tomorrow and help you move your stuff."

He smiled and quietly sat on the couch. I decided I wouldn't tell him that twenty years had passed since I had sold my truck.

My oldest sister arrived and took Mom for a day at the mall so that she could relax and recover from the night before. I stayed behind with Dad.

"You need new shoes, Dad. Let's go to the store. It'll do you good to get out of the house for a little bit." He willingly agreed, and I strapped him into the front seat of my car.

We had only traveled three blocks when Dad became extremely agitated. "I need to get back! I need to get back!" he panicked. "They're going to know I'm gone! They're watching! The general is going to find out! I need to get back!"

"Okay, okay!" I implored. "Stay calm, Dad! I have to find a place to make a U-turn!"

We returned to the house less than five minutes after we had departed. Safely inside, he paced back and forth, muttering to himself, "They're going to know! I'm not supposed to be away from the office!"

I didn't know exactly where he was, but I knew I had to join him there. "Dad," I began, "I'm going to call the base commander and let him know that you are following orders. Maybe he will give you some time off."

I stepped into the kitchen and dialed my sister living in Indiana. Whispering, I told her of Dad's state of mind. "Maybe you could convince him that he's not in trouble," I begged. Readily, she agreed, and I handed the phone to Dad.

"Sergeant Ramsey," she began. "The commander wanted me to let you know that he believes you have done a superb job. He believes you need to rest now. He has asked me to let you know that you have been granted a furlough. Congratulations, sergeant. Please have a restful week off."

"Okay," Dad muttered as he handed the phone back to me.

I thanked my secretary sister and assured her that I'd keep her posted throughout the day.

"What a quack!" Dad suddenly blurted. "That woman doesn't know anything!"

I let out a nervous chuckle which made him laugh as well. Soon we were both laughing uncontrollably.

Soon he was back in my world.

"I'll make us some coffee. Okay, Dad?" I announced, relieved that the latest storm was finally over. He smiled and sat on the couch as I started up the coffee pot.

I returned to the living room and waited with Dad as the coffee brewed. My father, who had never had trouble telling a story, now sat quietly as I rambled on trying to awaken some memory in his mind. Still, he sat silently, staring at me.

As I stood to fill our cups, he finally spoke. "Sir," he remarked, "I never got to know you very well..."

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