

What on Earth is Spiritual about Dementia?

DESCRIPTIVE WORDS Is it possible that the way we live our lives could be causing more and more individuals to succumb to dementia? Although dementia has very specific physical causes Sharon Snir looks at the combination of technology, electromagnetic energy and the loss of connection to Mother Earth as possible contributory reasons why people are getting dementia. In addition she looks at the unsettling phenomena of childhood dementia and invites us to consider how the education system is dulling our children's ability to express their innate imagination in a positive way. Finally we look at the many options we have to turn the tide together.

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When I think of my mother I think of a beautiful actress on stage performing in “Gas Light” a 1938 play written by the British dramatist Patrick Hamilton in 1938. To this day it remains it remains one of the longest-running non-musicals in Broadway history. I remember looking at her press clippings and marvelling at her acting career.

After she married my father Lionel, she gave birth to me and my sister and gradually moved back into the work force. She worked in an art gallery, in a fashion and in travel. From the outside she was doing exactly what she wanted in life.

But it was not exactly so. Hidden from public view Lily would occasionally wax lyrical that she too could have been a psychologist or a great actress or even an author. Though I never saw the book, she could quote great chunks out of a book she wrote but was never published.

About fourteen years ago my mother began to show signs of dementia. The first signs were so subtle that they were easy to dismiss. Lily began to ring me a few times a day and every

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conversation began by her asking me what are my plans for the day. At first I told her she had just called me and she would argue this is the first time she had spoken to me today. She became frustrated with my father when he would innocently correct her. She occasionally forgot someone's name but as dementia progressed she forgot everyone's name, except Lionel's. She lost interest makeup and manners. She let go of social expectations and followed her urges and perhaps even her heart.

I watched how people responded towards her. We reveal so much about ourselves by the way we respond in confronting situations. Dementia holds up a mirror and reflects back all our own fears and insecurities. I believe the choices we make are in direct correlation to how we feel about ourselves. Initially she was judged by friends who did not understand what was happening however as soon as people knew she had dementia the judgment stopped.

There is still, however, judgment about dementia (people are terrified of getting the dreaded D word) but there is no judgment about her right to be free, because now she has dementia. If she did not, if she had suddenly decided she was no longer interested in all the trapping and the expectations, if she said, I am just going to come and go as I please, when I please, how I please, there would have been a storm. But because she now has dementia, there is an allowing and a support. Indeed an encouraging. So it's pretty sad don't you think that someone has to lose their mind to find their freedom.

When I asked her why didn't she become a psychologist or an actress she shrugged and said she just married, had children and after all "my priority is now looking after your father."

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During the writing of my latest book, 'Looking for Lionel' I interviewed over thirty people all of who have someone in their life with dementia and I began to wonder why some people have a propensity to developing dementia, whilst others do not. Dementia by the way, is not a disease itself, rather a group of symptoms that usually accompany a severe disorder, like Alzheimer's.

But while dementia is something we tend to associate with ageing, occasionally in fact increasingly children are inflicted with it too. I want to come back to this a little later.

Over the past few years I have thought a great deal about why do some people get dementia and others don't and I have come up with a few ideas that I would like to share.

People with dementia are no longer grounded. By grounded I mean that they are not fully present: physically, emotionally and energetically. It means your mind is not wandering or pulling your energy elsewhere. Your heart and soul are not searching or regretting or resenting somewhere in the past or looking somewhere into the future.

People with dementia have lost their anchor. If a ship cannot put down its anchor it will float aimlessly upon the ocean. If a tree is not rooted into the earth it will fall over. If a balloon is not held firmly it will fly away.

One of the things that keep us anchored in the here and now is our connection to the earth and its cycles. When we let go of the land, or the land appears to be taken away from us, we become vulnerable. And that kind of vulnerability can and often does, lead to disease.

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Suicide rates of the worlds aboriginal peoples, particularly among youth, are considerably higher in many countries. In Australia, an aboriginal child can expect to die 20 years earlier than his non-native compatriot.

Connection to the land grounds our energies. Being in and with nature connects us to our own inner stillness. It reminds us to stop and breathe. It helps us to reconnect to our soul and our spirit. When we forget to notice the stars in a winter sky and the falling leaves of an old oak tree, or the dripping ice cream rolling down a child's arm, we lose contact with the earth.

What keeps us anchored in the here and the now is our connection to the earth, to nature and its cycles, night and day, summer, autumn, winter, spring. Much of humanity has moved from being one with the land, into dominating the landscape.

With the rapid increase of fast computers, mobile phones, instant connections and instant disconnections, life has sped up. This wave of fast-fast technology has impacted the electro magnetic energy field of the earth itself. People become agitated and little by little those who have a propensity begin to detach from the present because it has become uncomfortable.

And here I want to say a word or two about children.

The shocking reality is that dementia *is* possible in children and indeed it is a growing phenomenon. I believe we all have a responsibility to look at this and try to understand why this is happening and what we can do to stop the escalation of dementia in our children.

Dementia is a form of escape. It is a form of saying I do not like the world I am living in. I do not like how it looks. I want to create a place where I am safe. And they can only do that in their mind

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For me it is not possible to discuss dementia in children from a purely physical perspective as I am of the belief that every disease emerges out of dis-ease. So the question is why do our children feel dis-ease and in what ways are we contributing to this?

If you look at our earth, if you look at what is occurring even without considering the financial crisis, but you look at the wars, the droughts, the famines, the changing climate that concerns and frightens so many, it is not surprising that people are afraid of the world in which they live and they want to live in something different, safer, better.

Children are encouraged to use their imaginations. Of course they are because it is a Saving Grace, but they need to be encouraged to use it wisely.

They need to be encouraged to change what they do not like, not escape it.

Our children are growing up in the age of terrorism and fatuousness – the images that will be their earliest memories are the images of 9/11 and Britney Spears. And no one's doing anything about it. The gap between achievement and satisfaction is growing, and our children's well-being is at an all time low. Individualism rules and self-esteem is dangerously high. Too many young people are too fragile to cope with perceived failure. And who wants to have all their weak points held up to ridicule and their good points ignored? Much safer to live through an avatar, and stay in your bedroom, than to risk being rejected out in the real world as not pretty, rich or smart enough. With virtual reality, you have a chance of achieving some control and status. Reality is much riskier. But without taking risks especially the risk of failing and making mistakes we lose out sense of who we are. The view of reality that we're giving our children is so skewed and miserable, why *would* they want to be part of it?

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In her 2007 Hector Crawford Memorial lecture Noni Hazelhurst commented this very issue around children pointing to the despair and destruction we see every day on the news. The news room philosophy is “if it bleeds, it leads”. Most of the stories deal with the end of the world, ghastly crimes, or people making heinous mistakes, ripping each other off and just generally behaving badly. The evening news airs during traditional dinnertime, so children are absorbing violent images without parents thinking twice.

From time to time we shake our heads and express concern, but basically most of us are too busy trying to survive. Or we dismiss these concerns as the desire of the older generation for a return to the old days. But this is an appalling cop out. We’ve systematically allowed our freedom, joy and responsibility to be taken from us. And we’ve substituted greed, competition, lonely striving, greyness, debts, fast food, reality television and the Stock Exchange.

In order for children to grow well they need to connect with Nature. Ronen Berger the founder of the Nature therapy centre in Israel and I would encourage you to have a look at his article [Using Contact with nature, creativity and rituals as a therapeutic medium with children with learning difficulties](#). Children need to discover for themselves the beauty and magic of simply seeing an ant carry a load 10 its own weight. They need to hear the sound of a rushing river and the silence that exists in the desert, bush in the spaces between the doing in all of life.

It has been estimated that we each create over 50,000 thoughts every day. That’s busy! And it’s tiring. There are 2 main things we need to do to reclaim inner peace ~ change the quantity and quality of our thoughts.

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We all need to put the brake on the perpetual doing and thinking. Unless we learn to pause, look inward and listen how can we teach our children to do the same?

Unless we teach our children constructive ways to use their imagination wisely, unless we encourage them to create and not escape with their imagination, some very sensitive children will continue to say to themselves I don't like this world. I don't want to be here.

Someone who uses their creativity to escape will make an excuse or a reason not to participate in something, so they can hide away or go away. They move away from that something. Someone who uses their imagination to create, will say, well this is the energy and I am expected to be part of it, so what can I do within it, what can I do that is acceptable to make the experience more attractive? More inviting?

We all need to be encouraging participation to bring about change, not avoidance.

However, once the seed thought occurs the physical form, transformation begins take place which can lead to physical disease.

As adults we are all aware that multi-tasking is an outgrowth of our computer and media-generated era. As computers and electronic devices have become higher powered and more sophisticated, the features they offer have grown in number and complexity. A cellphone was initially just that, a mobile phone. But in time, it became a camera, a video camera, an iPod facsimile, a GPS device, a handheld computer, and all kinds of other things. We seem to have a fixation in our culture with "more is better." But we're not so good at figuring out "how much is enough?"

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As a consequence, because of what is being allowed to develop unchecked and un-balanced, those who need an anchor, loose it. We have forgotten how to balance our lives through nature. People have forgotten how to connect to the Earth. We are no longer aware of the cycles of the seasons. We have lost our healthy respect for the elements, fire, water, air and earth. We seem to believe that we can control everything and of course we cannot. When we separate from the land we are at the mercy of the powerfully ungrounding forces of technology.

As people lose their connection to the land they get caught up in the ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’ and ‘have to’s’ of everyday life. They long for the good old days when they were free. These people stayed in jobs that long ago ceased to be satisfying, because they offered a means to financial security. They visited friends they were no longer interested in, because it is easier to just go along. They were dutiful husbands and the silent wives who continued as they always have, because choosing something different was terrifying. They dared not toss caution to the wind, nor did they take any risks fearing intolerable consequences. And sometimes, like Lily, they spent their life supporting others to be what they themselves dreamed of being. These people feel an underlying sense of dissatisfaction and believe they are powerless to change it.

If only I had enough time to study acting.

If only I didn't have this huge mortgage.

If only I could travel alone without hurting my family

If only I had known he was never coming back.



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These thoughts take us out of the present. They make living in the present a painful experience. Attaching to the past is the first step to detaching from the now.

In time their connection to their dreams also fade, and they become more vulnerable to the disease. Mentally they began to detach from the past as well. They lose that anchor also. As the disease progresses, connection to the present and the past becomes more fragile. One minute they are here in the present and in the next minute they are gone. These thoughts take us out of the present. They make living in the present a painful experience. Attaching to the past is the first step to detaching from the now. In time our connection to our dreams fade, and we become more vulnerable to disease. Mentally we begin to detach from the past as well. And then we lose that anchor also. One moment we are present and the next moment we are gone. As Alzheimer's disease progresses, connection to the present and the past becomes more fragile.

In this technological world have we all forgotten how to lie on the grass at night and look up at the stars. We need to wake up early sometimes and feel the early morning dew under our feet at sun rise. When I was a child I loved to stare up at the clouds and make animals. We need to acknowledge and even mark the changes of the seasons. We need to celebrate and ritualise every child's rite of passage, be in a boy's first whisker and a girl's first menstruation.

It is through our connection to nature and our willingness to clear and heal all the issues in our life when they come up that we have a damn good chance of living a long and healthy life. The alternative is to risk becoming a ship without an anchor.