

C.5 A Carer's Story: Geoff Bennett

(Geoff narrated his Story to Rev. Frank Van Der Korput on 2nd May 2018)

Geoff Bennett is a n 87-year-old widower living in Tamworth NSW. His first wife died of leukaemia. He was married to his second wife Helen (who was a widow) for 14 years. She died of Lewy Body dementia in October 2017. For the last three years of her life she lived in a Home (residential aged care facility).

Helen showed typical Lewy Body dementia symptoms, including visual hallucinations. She “saw little boys that weren’t there”, and “wouldn’t eat porridge because there were worms in it”. She would step over water that wasn’t there, and colour-changes on the floor greatly affected her walking. Before moving into care Helen became verbally and physically aggressive. One morning Geoff woke up because Helen was “thumping” him. She was screaming: “What are you doing with Geoffrey’s pyjamas on? Get out of my house”. On another occasion she swore that her daughter and Geoff were having an affair. Such aggression, paranoia, suspicion and so on are typical symptoms.

In the beginning Helen would write notes. Towards the end she would give her things away and take things from other people. This is also normal dementia behaviour.

Geoff visited Helen every day for three years. Geoff said that “as soon as she saw me she’d run and wrap her arms around me – but she didn’t know her own children”. He would sing some of the 200-odd travelling songs which they used to sing on their travels, including a few hymns. She loved “Amazing Grace”. In the early days she would sing a little. Geoff said that “She became calmer when I sang”. At the end of every visit Geoff would dance with Helen. It was his way of saying “got to go now”. One day a GP heard him sing and saw him dance. The GP said that he wished everyone could do that, because the home would be much better for it.

Geoff spoke of a “nasty resident ... violent”. He would sing to her and she “changed completely, singing along and smiling”. That’s a wonderful example of the expression “Music soothes the savage breast”.

Geoff greatly appreciated the groups that came into the Home and sang and played instruments. Helen joined in.

Geoff said that “the nurses and staff were absolutely beautiful to me ... just so caring and giving ... They appreciated the help I gave e.g. showering Helen, giving her eye drops, and in the last stages of her life feeding her”.

Geoff valued the companionship of another man whose wife was also in the Home. They had long talks which were good for both of them.

Geoff said his way of coping with the “terrible loss” of Helen’s dementia was the daily visits. They were “therapy for me”. However, “towards the end she’d walk off for no reason ... in the end she couldn’t walk at all”.

Since Helen’s death Geoff has found it “really hard”. He experiences a lot of loneliness – “even in a crowded room”. He has deliberately begun teaching art at home, joined U3A, does up old furniture, and makes picture frames. He is not simply being busy but being productive.

Geoff wrote the following poem. I have reproduced it with his permission.

Helen where are you?

I feel your nearness as I lay in bed and reach to touch your hand.

But you’re not there.

I hear you singing in your flower room as you weave your magic on a bouquet for a bride to be.

But you’re not there.

I sit on the lounge and listen to the music that we hold so dear.

But you’re not there.

I hear the organ in the lounge room as you play “I love you truly”.

But you’re not there.

I walk around the garden and see the flowers that you have planted and smell the perfume floating in the air.

But you’re not there.

I see and hear so many things throughout the day and night, and even though you’re not there.

You are always in my heart.