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'Spiritual relationship is far more precious than physical'

by Michael Leach

Soul Seeing

The Greenwich Adult Day Care Center is only a mile away. It's having a Christmas party this afternoon, so I dress Vickie in a white linen blouse under a red sweater with white reindeer prancing through snowflakes. We go downstairs to the kitchen and say good morning to the white Buddha who sits in our backyard under a cherry tree, its bare branches decorated with red and silver Christmas ornaments. Vickie sips a chocolate Ensure while I slice a banana for our Cheerios.

River House, the name of the center, is a five-minute drive down the road that runs along the Mianus River. I pull up at 9:15 a.m. and help Vickie out of the car. Liz Minott, the senior health aide, wearing reindeer horns and puffing cold air, takes Vickie's hand and leads her inside. Liz is one of 14 professionals who from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. care for 50 women and men who have Alzheimer's, like Vickie, or other age-related challenges. The members socialize, exercise, play games, hear concerts and go on field trips. There's an interfaith service on Mondays, Catholic Mass on Tuesdays, a visit to Christ Episcopal Church on Wednesdays, a Protestant service on Thursdays, and a spiritual discussion group on Fridays. There was a Shabbat service last month, and today at 2 p.m. is the Christmas party, where the full-time caregivers like me are invited to join the fun.

I get home at 9:30 a.m. and sit at the computer to write my Soul Seeing column for Jan. 31. I want to write something about ducks and intimacy. Vickie and I were driving home from her neurologist yesterday when Sean Hannity on WOR warned us of "a huge cultural moment for this country." Phil Robertson, the bearded patriarch of "Duck Dynasty," a reality show Sean equated with "The Honeyymooners," could get fired for telling *GQ*, in words that left nothing to the imagination, that in his opinion, carnal knowledge between men and women is way better than between men and men. "I mean, come on, dudes! You know what I'm saying?"

Sean said "Duck Dynasty" dealt with "some of the important issues of the day" and the fate of our country depends on what happens to Phil.

That night, TV talking heads shouted clever things like, "The Bible says Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Some men like to reduce the body to taps and drains. Our culture's only danger is forgetting the whole, of catching Alzheimer's of the soul.

So this morning I type: "Vickie and I were driving home from her neurologist yesterday when Sean Hannity on WOR ..." I don't get much further. Soon it's time for the Christmas party.

I find Vickie in the annex of River House. Its windows overlook the waterfall that flows into Long Island Sound to become one with the ocean. Wayne Hill, a former Marine, coaches women and men who take turns putting on an artificial green. The folks pull for each other as if each one's success was all their successes. When Vickie gets her turn, she bends over the ball like Jack Nicklaus and her hands remember their perfect grip. Her first hit goes right in the hole. Her companions cheer.

We go into the big room and take our seats for Christmas caroling. Vickie sits at my right and Vito, who comes twice a week, on my left. Vito leans over and asks Vickie her name. "Happy," she says.

We all have lyric sheets. Many of the folks who can't remember what happened two minutes ago know the words by heart: "Joy to the world ... O come, all ye faithful ... Silent night ..." Vickie sings and glows like an angel on top of a tree.

Lyndsay De Matteo, a program coordinator, conducts the Bell Girls. Each woman holds a bell and shakes it when Lindsay points. Out of many bells comes one song: "Jingle Bells." As they play, Joan Grace, the program nurse, gives two of the members their afternoon meds. The aides wind their way around the rows of men and women like tinsel around the aging limbs of a tree, giving each person cake, juice and a stocking with candy canes. I know that none of this is a great cultural moment, but it sure is a terrific spiritual one.

River House teaches me what the TV prophets and pundits don't know. It teaches me what Gandhi knew: "Spiritual relationship is far more precious than physical. Physical relationship divorced from spiritual is body without soul."

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Vickie and I hold hands. We gaze out the window and watch ducks paddling without fear near the waterfall but closer to River House. I think I know where my column is going.

[Michael Leach is a writer and editor who wants to know what it's all about.]

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