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The surprising grace of Alzheimer's; even those who aren't caregivers can benefit from author's insights

by Michael Leach



WHERE TWO WORLDS TOUCH: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY THROUGH

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

By Jade C. Angelica

Published by Skinner House, \$16

"What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though." -- Holden Caulfield, The Catcher in the Rye

Where Two Worlds Touch: A Spiritual Journey Through Alzheimer's Disease was that kind of book for me. So when I was done reading it, I called the author up. "Hello, is this the Rev. Jade Angelica?"

"Yes?"

"You don't know me, my name is Michael Leach and I'm writing a review of your book for the *National Catholic Reporter* and I just want to tell you it's the best book on Alzheimer's I've ever read and I want to thank you. I've underlined practically the whole thing. It looks like a flight map."

She laughed. "I'm so grateful," she said. "When I started it, all I wanted to do was reach people and be helpful."

"You reached me. My wife has advanced Alzheimer's and you taught me stuff I didn't know. I'm going to say in my review that even those who aren't caregivers will benefit from the book. The spirituality for living a good life is just so real." Then I asked Angelica what I usually ask writers before they begin their books. "What is the one thing you hope readers get out of it, the one thing they'll take away and remember the rest of their lives?"

She thought for a moment. "Value ... the value of people with Alzheimer's and dementia, and the beauty of those who love them. The book is about meeting persons with Alzheimer's and falling in love and respect for them. They give us a unique opportunity to exercise our innate compassion. We need to see them as they are -- gifts from God -- of value to us and to society. Caring for my mother brought out the best in me -- and in her."

In 2008, Angelica moved from her ministry in Boston to Iowa to care for her mother full-time until she died in 2011. "I knew that caring for her would be the most important work of my life." She began a spiritual journey through the glass darkly of Alzheimer's into a world of clarity and compassion. Her story isn't about losing her mother while she seemed to be disappearing day by day. She focuses not on what was lost but on what both of them found.

"I tried to write the book as a spiritual companion for family caregivers and anyone who loves someone with Alzheimer's," she said. "More than 5 million people are suffering with some form of dementia. By embracing them with a holy vision and an open heart, it's possible for caregivers on this sacred journey to bear witness to the surprising grace of Alzheimer's as I did. It isn't easy, but it's possible that they'll notice and receive unexpected gifts, and experience awe and gratitude for the ways that Alzheimer's can touch their hearts and give meaning to their lives."

Angelica has a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School and a Doctor of Ministry degree in faith, health and spirituality from Andover Newton Theological School. Her mother was diagnosed in 2001 while Angelica was ministering to abused children in Maine. Angelica made multiple trips home each year and honored her mother and what she was going through by studying about Alzheimer's and identifying unique ways to communicate, connect and enhance relationships with people who have dementia. She founded Healing Moments, an Alzheimer's ministry that provides practical and creative strategies to caregivers throughout the country.

Angelica started the book as an academic treatise, but while living in Iowa, she could not help but write it as if having a conversation over a cup of coffee late at night with a friend starting the same journey. Her author's voice is warm, authentic, and learned without being knowing. She quotes medical and psychological experts and more so spiritual writers, including St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Avila, Teilhard de Chardin, Marcus Borg, Karen Armstrong, Richard Rohr and Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister. Most of all, she shares stories, hers and others', and eases us into their lessons so that our caregiving experience becomes a spiritual discipline.

Where Two Worlds Touch is supremely practical, with instructions on every stage of the disease, from initial acceptance, to caring for someone at home and, later, while in a nursing home, which Alzheimer's heavy hand often makes necessary.

I loved her insights on discerning what a loved one is thinking when she cannot communicate, how to meet needs she can't express. Persons with Alzheimer's communicate with heart speech all the time, and we can, too. There's a marvelous riff on the value of improvisational theater techniques -- à la Second City -- which for a caregiver is simply the ability to say yes. "To accept what's happening and what's said as true and valid -- even when our scene partner offers a new or surprising direction," Angelica writes.

The word yes is comforting, and almost always what the other person is looking for. Doing improv is the only intelligent thing you can do when you don't have a clue what's going on, and it relaxes both of you. A light heart is good; a light heart works. Angelica has a wonderful chapter on forgetting, forgiving and reconciling that is of value to everyone, as well as one on time: "Choose love. There is always time enough for love." I could go on but there is no space.

The book ends with a glossary of terms, a reading list and interesting notes. It's one to keep on your nightstand and read for your own spiritual nourishment, just as you would a book on meditation. It's that beneficial. If Alzheimer's teaches you anything, it's the healing value of living moment by moment and meeting whatever needs present themselves without judgment. I'd also recommend that every clergyperson have two or three on hand to give to a parishioner who is a caregiver.

After my chat with Angelica, I went back to the book and looked up the last two paragraphs of a chapter that moved me deeply, "The Last Word." Angelica's mother dies and Angelica is with her. She reflects:

"The last word. The last step. The last kiss. The last breath. The last good-bye.

"I am so grateful and happy that I didn't miss them."

[Michael Leach is editor at large and publisher emeritus of Orbis Books.]

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