

Thoughts From THE HEARTS
BY Joseph [Josephus] Smith
2012 AUG 20
1645HRS:

THE VANISHING MIND
PART I

I have put off writing this for some time,
largely because it was too painful for me
to talk about, more less to write about, my Grand-
mother, and largely, too, because I was worried
that my experience, which is solely that, my
experience, might cause others undue consternation.
In all honesty, the first reason is the most
telling: "ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE" is a horrendous
ailment, it takes someone away, before the
body is gone, and it diminishes that person
in very small but profound ways. First, the
loved one loses some of their vocabulary or seems
stuck in the interstices of life, as if the
film of one's daily happenings were cut, and
one was living in a few frames, with the rest
of the narrating "UNFOLDING" in the next theater,
which, somehow, one can readily see. For a
powerful second, the two theaters are showing

THE SAME FRAME, BUT THEN THINGS DEVOLVE,
THE CORRESPONDENCES UNHINGE, AND BOTH THEATERS
GROW SHADOWY; THE FILM IS STILL PLAYING, THERE'S
EVEN A SHOW OF DELIGHT ON THE LOVED ONE'S
FACE, BUT IT IS A PRIVATE, PECULIAR DELIGHT,
AS HARD TO IMAGINE AS THE SOY OF A SNAKE
CUT IN HALVES, ITS TWO SEVERED PIECES STR-
UGGLING FOR A RAPPROCHEMENT. THE DISEASE, MOST
CENTRALLY, IS ABOUT LOSS AND LOVE, BOTH SO TIGHTLY EN-
TWINED, THAT I AM REMINDED OF A WONDERFUL
CHINESE PAINTING OF A BRILLIANT LONG-STEMMED
LILY THAT I CONFRONTED 30 YEARS AGO AT
THE NEW YORK ART MUSEUM. INITIALLY, THE
OVERWHELMING FLOWER SEEMED MERELY VIBRANT,
RESPLENDENT, AND TRIUMPHANT. ITS COLOR WAS VITAL,
ITS PRESENCE, INCONTESTABLE. BUT THEN IF ONE WAS
ATTENTIVE, ONE NOTICED A SLIGHT SLIVER OF DECAY, LIKE
A SMALL FINGER, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STEM, ONE
REALIZED, THAT IS, THAT BEAUTY AND DESTRUCTION
SHARE THE SAME ROOT, THAT ONE UNDERGIRDSS THE
OTHER. ALZHEIMER'S SLOWLY, GOD KNOWS, PRESENT
THE DECIMATION AND EVEN, AT TIMES, THE POSSIBILITY
OF A FLOWER; BUT THERE IS NO BALANCE, NO ARTIFICE.
THERE IS NO SUITABLE METAPHOR. AT THE TIME OF MY
GRANDMOTHER'S DIAGNOSIS THERE WAS NOT MUCH INFORMATION
ABOUT THE DISEASE. HOWEVER, THERE WERE SIX WARNING
SIGNS AND SHE EXHIBITED ALL OF THEM. WITH HER WONDERFUL

MANNERS, MY NANA, (WHICH I CALLED HER) ALSO EVOLVED INCREDIBLE COPING SKILLS. AS SHE REALIZED THAT HER FACULTIES WERE DIMINISHING, SHE EMPLOYED A BRILLIANT RUSE TO KEEP UP PRETENSES. WHEN I ASKED MY NANA MY NAME, SHE QUICKLY ANSWERED, "YOU KNOW YOUR OWN, WHY WOULD YOU ASK ME THAT?" WITH THIS PRACTICED NEW YORKER REFINEMENT THAT SHOWED BOTH HER MASTERY OF RETORT, AND HER ABILITY, AT LEAST TO KEEP, HER THE CONVERSATION ROLLING. MY GRANDMOTHER DIDN'T HAVE THE FOGGIEST NOTION WHO I WAS OR WHAT HER CONNECTION WAS TO ME, BUT SHE HAD OUTWITTED ME. AS TIME PASSED, AND SHE BECAME MORE AND MORE REMOTE, MY GRANDMOTHER BECAME MORE AND MORE REMOTE, MY GRANDMOTHER TALKED LESS AND LESS, AND OUR TIME TOGETHER WENT MORE AND MORE OCCUPIED WITH COMBING HER HAIR AND DOING THINGS FOR HER. MY NANA HAD LONG PRETTY BLACK HAIR, AND SHE ENJOYED ME COMBING IT. ONE WEEKEND I TOOK HER TO CONEY ISLAND, AND WE WENT ON A BIG TEEDY BEAR, SHE SMILED WHEN I PRESENTED IT TO HER, I ASKED HER WHAT SHE WOULD NAME THE BEAR, SHE LOOKED AT ME, WITH HER BEAUTIFUL HAZEL EYES AND REPLIED, "I'D CALL THE TEDDY BEAR JOSEPHUS" WHEN SHE SAID THIS, I WAS NEAR TEARS, FOR THE LAST SIX MONTHS, MY NANA HAD SHOWN NO IMPULSE TO TOUCH DOWN WITH ME; WE HAD BEEN TOGETHER, BUT THERE HAD BEEN NO ARTICULATION ON HER PART OF OUR INVOLVEMENT. NANA, WHY DO YOU CALL THE BEAR JOSEPHUS? I ASKED HER.

HER EYES SOFTENED AND SHE ANSWERED, "IT'S A NAME I KNOW WELL, AND IT'S A NAME THAT COMFORTS ME. SHE LOOKED AT ME, REACHED OUT AND TOUCHED MY FACE, AND SAID, "YOUR NAME IS JOSEPHUS." AND THEN SHE GREW QUIET. SHE WOULD NEVER SPEAK AN INTELLIGIBLE WORD AGAIN. WHY NOW, BECAUSE I SEE A GROWING NUMBER OF ALZHEIMER'S PRISONERS HERE AT THE PRISON I'M CURRENTLY HOUSED. ALZHEIMER AND DEMENTIA IN PRISON IS AN UNDERREPORTED, BUT FASTGROWING PHENOMENON, ONE THAT MANY PRISONS ARE DESPERATELY UNPREPARED TO HANDLE. IT IS AN UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCE OF GET TOUGH ON CRIME POLICIES, LONG SENTENCES THAT HAVE CREATED A LARGE POPULATION OF AGING PRISONERS. WHILE NO ONE HAS—COUNTED COGNITIVELY IMPAIRED PRISONERS, EXPERTS SAY THAT PRISONERS APPEAR MORE PRONE TO DEMENTIA THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION BECAUSE THEY OFTEN HAVE MORE RISK FACTORS: LIMITED EDUCATION, HYPERTENSION, DIABETES, SMOKING, DEPRESSION, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, EVEN HEAD INJURIES FROM FIGHTS AND OTHER PRISON VIOLENCE. PROTECTING THEM FROM OTHER PRISONERS, IS A CHALLENGE ALSO. PROTECTING MY NANA, FROM FAMILY MEMBERS BECAME A CHALLENGE, SO MUCH SO, I HAD TO GO TO PROBATE COURT FOR "LEGAL" "HELP" BUT THAT I COULDN'T HAVE DONE WITH IT MYSELF, BUT NANA NEEDED ME MORE NOW THAN EVER.