

## 'Hello, I love you, won't you tell me my name?'

I am an underwear thief. I am also a sock thief. I am not proud of the fact that I had to steal these items, let alone steal them from my own mother. But it had to be done. I am dealing with a "difficult" parent. My mother has dementia.

On Feb. 6, 2010, my father, Vern McKinnon, passed away. By the end of March 2010, my mother, Mary, agreed to relocate from my parents' home in the western suburbs of Chicago to live with me in Indianapolis. At the time I had two of my own children living with me and my husband as well as a foreign exchange student and two extremely needy greyhounds.

It didn't take more than a day for the "difficulties" to surface after my mother moved in. My mother refused to allow anyone in our house to watch the big screen TV in our living room on any channel other than her beloved CNN – 24 hours per day, seven days per week. I've often thought that this would be a good method of torture. There is only so much violence and unrest you can watch before you want to practice it on yourself or on those around you. The greyhounds were particularly upset at the constant sound of gunshots and screaming on TV. To add to the "festive" atmosphere, my mother took it upon herself to constantly "correct" everyone around her on a daily basis. During a doctor's visit at this time, the top number of my husband's blood pressure rose to "170." He was already on *two* high blood pressure medications at the time. The enemy, as I realized, was now in our midst.

Dementia is often an unseen enemy. You can't look at someone and say, "Oh, she has dementia," simply judging by that person's appearance. But if you could look inside, for example, at one of my mother's brain scans, you would be able to witness the evidence. I'm an attorney. I like to see the evidence. In my mother's case, there were literally hundreds of white dots inside my mother's brain. Each dot represented a spot where the brain tissue no longer functioned properly.

In addition, the front part of her brain, the frontal cortex, had shrunk. As you may recall, the frontal cortex is the area that governs proper social behavior, including sympathy for others. In my mother's case, this area consisted primarily of empty space and fluid. It wasn't her fault. But that didn't make things any easier on the rest of us.

Another way that dementia is "unseen" is that the people who have the disease do not believe, or cannot recall, that they have it. For a family member

who is a caregiver, this can lead to some interesting, and sometimes humorous situations. It is also a constant source of stress.

In my own case, I had to steal my mother's underwear. I did not want to do this, but my mother would forget that she needed to wear disposable underwear in order to keep her clothes dry. Instead, she insisted on wearing her normal white granny panties. This was particularly annoying to my children who had to sit in the same seat in the car after it had been vacated by my mother. At the request of the staff at my mother's assisted living facility, I finally stole all of my mother's underwear. I also secretly removed all of her white ankle socks so that she would wear her compression hose. I was not proud of my efforts to outwit a woman with dementia, but it had to be done.

There can be unexpected benefits from taking care of someone with dementia. The stories told by someone with dementia are sometimes more interesting than the facts that happen in real life. If they cannot recall what actually happened, then they simply make it up. I wonder if this is not true of Uncle Si on *Duck Dynasty*. The truth is just not as interesting as a good story.

For example, my mother was in the hospital on Thanksgiving Day in 2010. By the time she had retold this story, not only was she in the hospital an entire month of November, instead of only seven days, but she had not been allowed to eat the entire time. No turkey on Thanksgiving Day! In real life she had consumed turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pie, and tried to share with me and the visitors to her room that day.

You may not know that someone with memory issues may shift the blame for her memory problems on you, the caregiver. If that person used to blame her spouse for the things she couldn't remember and that spouse passed away, then you will now become the focus of her anger.

It is not that she cannot remember where she put her wallet, but that you stole the wallet and all of the money that was in it. It is not that she can't remember the last time you visited, but that you have not visited for days, weeks or even months. It can be a constant battle during each visit regarding what *you* did wrong today.

As an attorney, I faced the ethical dilemma of asking a doctor to increase my mother's dementia medications simply because I could no longer cope with her anger. But was it me or was it my mother who truly benefited from this medication change?



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It is difficult, as an adult child, to take care of a parent. You must assume a role for which you are not trained. Attorneys do not like to take on tasks for which they are not trained. But, like the lifelong task of raising a child, there is no substitute for on-the-job training.

While gaining this experience, you must take courage and not give up, even when you are surrounded by other “enemies.” They can take the shape of the demands of your job, your spouse or your children, not to mention your own guilt and shame. No one else understands what you are going through. While friends and family members try to help ease the burden, in the end the buck stops here. You are the one who must deal with all of the “difficulties.”

The good news is that you are not alone.

JLAP, Indiana’s Judges & Lawyers Assistance Program, can help. **JLAP will be offering a new support group for attorneys managing the care of an elderly parent.** The first meeting will take place on **Wednesday, Sept. 11, at 6 p.m.** If you’d like to join this support group for the first meeting, or subsequent meetings, to be held on the second Wednesday of each month, please contact JLAP at 317/833-0370 or 866/428-5527.

If you’re not sure if you are truly dealing with a “difficult” elderly parent, then I recommend a book written by Grace LeBow and Barbara Kane, *Coping With Your Difficult Older Parent: A Guide For Stressed-Out Children*. It is published by HarperCollins and available for purchase on the Internet. The authors include several pages of questionnaires to use in determining whether you have a “difficult” elderly parent. “Difficult” does not refer to the physical burden of caring for a parent in a state

of decline; it’s the emotional drain of trying to help a parent who is simply hard to deal with.

In my own case, I have found refuge in laughter and the support of those around me, and in faith. In the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament, Nehemiah sets out to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem that had been destroyed 90 years earlier. There are enemies surrounding him on all sides as well as enemies within the scattered group of men working with him. In Chapter 4, Nehemiah instructs the builders to keep one hand on their weapons at all times, leaving only one hand free for work. Nehemiah is prepared for battle – and prepares those around him for battle – but he does not give up or lose his faith. He knows, in the end, that the wall will be rebuilt. For those of us dealing with “difficult” elderly parents, this can be an important lesson to remember.

You will be happy to know that I have not had to steal anything else from my mother other than her underwear and socks. There is, however, the constant question: “Where is my purse?” Her purse, with its 1,000 emery boards and 13 clear plastic rain bonnets, now sits in its permanent place of honor – the trunk of my car. It is “on vacation,” as I have told her, until the next trip we make to the doctor.

There is also the matter of her wedding ring. My mother has lost so much weight that her wedding ring no longer fits. It is too loose. The staff at her current skilled care facility has expressed concern on multiple occasions that my mother will simply throw the ring in the trash as she did with her glasses. But please note – I have not had to “steal” this item. A few months ago, my mother gave the ring to me,

saying, “... hang on to it until I am better.” I will. But the underwear and socks are going in the trash. Now. ☺

*Patricia L. McKinnon is a certified family law specialist in solo practice in Indianapolis. She requests that opposing counsel not share her tendencies to steal her mother’s items, either with her own clients or with an out-of-county judge. You can reach her by email at [pmckinnon@indianafamilylawyer.com](mailto:pmckinnon@indianafamilylawyer.com).*