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CHAPTER 45

The Long Goodbye

A Poem for You on Father's Day

by Karen Cairns, June 17, 2001

She swims in sleep
skin caressed by water
soft and warm as air.
Without thought
without words…
Timeless.

And awakens to the terror of a dry land
where all is named.

Lost and alone
abandoned by the past
and in an unfamiliar present.

My father hugs her,
holds her close to his heart
as her eyes fill with tears.

"Why…
Why…
Who would do that?"

She begs.

My father hugs her,
holds her close in his heart.

Comforted, she returns to sleep
traveling lightly in a world
without words…

Resting in deep time.

When our daughter Karen wrote this poem, Jeannie and I were separated by her health issues after 55 years together. We were married in August 1944 during World War II, but the 55 years together began in February 1946 when I was discharged from the US Navy.

The older I get the more clearly I remember things that never happened. Mark Twain

Jeannie and I were products of our culture, which was shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. Also, we each spent our childhoods in different environments — mine in a blue-collar mill town and Jeannie's in middle-class suburbia. Pipher (1999) comments on the relationships of each generation with its parents and grandparents:

> *If age is Another Country, then we must all learn to speak its language. As our parents and grandparents grow older, it's hard to find the words to talk about medicine, loneliness, love, forgetfulness, or selling the house. It's difficult to decipher our feelings and their feelings, and the things are left unsaid. We need a language that bridges the gap between generations and takes into account that our elders can be just as reluctant to ask for or even accept our time and our efforts as we are eager to understand the wants and needs of people who lived before television, Freudian psychology, e-mail, and the first trip to the moon.*

I am writing this book to help those of my children's generation better understand those of my generation and our needs as we age. My daughter Karen and I have been having many long conversations as we try to find the words and language to bridge the generation gap. As Karen says, this process is sometimes frustrating, sometimes humorous, but ultimately worthwhile and rewarding for both of us.

As a scientist who studies anthropogenic effects upon Earth's life support system, the Biosphere, I am appalled at the rapid decline of the Biosphere that is threatened by eight interactive global crises (Cairns 2010). These crises will be worsened by exponential population growth, overconsumption, and inefficient resource use. If they are not eliminated, humankind will need 27 planet Earths by 2050 (Leahy 2011). As a result, except for a few people deeply concerned about damage to the Biosphere, I feel I am living on an alien planet where the main focus is on THE ECONOMY, not Earth's life support system. I confess to retreating to a "too good to be true" past that becomes more attractive every day.

When I share memories of Jeannie's and my life together, a common comment is "It seems too good to be true" — my thought precisely when I reflect on those wonderful days. We certainly had arguments and disagreements, but I have no lasting memory of these except about three that related to stress caused by professional, administrative responsibilities that I failed to keep in perspective. I truly cannot remember other arguments, either because "I am rewriting history to fit some abstract model" or, more likely, because, once a disagreement was over, it was forgotten and never mentioned again. Neither of us bore a grudge against the other. The most common argument for married couples centers on finances. Jeannie and I never had a single argument about money. She had no interest in financial matters beyond the basics of food, shelter, and clothing, and she hated shopping. However, sometimes one of us would make a remark that horrified others — for example, once Jeannie counted the number of times I took my glasses off and put them back on (17) during a lecture. But that trait was just Jeannie, who counted the number of bridges on the Appalachian Trail en route to the Audie Murphy Memorial. Another example is that I always checked at least three times to verify that the door we left through when leaving the house for a trip was locked. Jeannie never failed to make a sarcastic remark about this practice.

A year or two after Jeannie's death, I wrote a chapter for this autobiography, but did not use it in the volume because I did not feel that it was satisfactory. I wrote it too soon after losing her. At present, I feel I have a better perspective on the last years we had together. Her presence with me is woven throughout this autobiography, especially in chapters 31, 32, 37, and 39. The last days of our life together benefited from a bond that was not broken, even when tested by Alzheimer's.

Our life together really began when I walked into the living room at Kenmore Road, Havertown, PA, in early February 1946 with my honorable discharge from the US Navy and was greeted by Jeannie, Mother Ogden (Jeannie's mother), Kathy Osgood (now Brady), and later by our nearly 3-month old daughter Karen. Our children and some of our friends have remarked that they cannot visualize either of us being married to anyone else. However, at that time, neither of us did many of the things we did later in our lives that were very important bonding factors — folk dancing, long hikes, summers at field stations, concerts, plays, simple living, daily visits to the outdoors, folboting (open cockpit kayaks), vegetarian diets, ethical culture, and swimming up to a mile each day. We each also did activities on our own — trout fishing and research for me and fair housing, head start program, interracial activities, book discussion groups, recorder group, score keeping at softball games, and YMCA craft fairs and other Y activities for Jeannie.

In the early stages of my research career, Jeannie and I did not have large amounts of time together. However, the family was together for meals (except lunch), and summers were spent in a small cottage, which my father owned, one-half block from the ocean in Surf City, NJ. Starting in 1961, summers were spent in a small cabin at

Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory near Crested Butte, CO, and later at the University of Michigan Biological Station near the tip of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. The entire family was together for the entire summer.

Jeannie and I forged an exceptionally strong bond, even under less than ideal conditions. When our youngest child Heather left for Swarthmore College in 1976, Jeannie began to accompany me on trips within the country and abroad. She had previously been with me on a few trips when the two youngest children could fend for themselves. Jeannie traveled with me on a speaking tour of Great Britain, including Durham, Liverpool, Newcastle, London, Scotland, and Wales. She also accompanied me on a speaking tour of Eastern Australia, including the University of Tasmania and other spots in or near Sydney and Melbourne.

Jeannie and I both believed that actions communicate values better than words. Values should influence behavior and actions should be congruent with professed values. Spending time together is the best way of showing that actions match words. Jeannie believed that how one lives one's life is what is most meaningful. Her mentor at Penn State during her undergraduate years was a Dr. Stevens — she was both a medical doctor and a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). She held Sunday evening discussions for students, and Jeannie attended these meetings regularly. Dr. Stevens also took students on weekend retreats to such places as Black Moshannon State Park near Philipsburg in Centre County, PA.

When Jeannie and I met at age 18, we had a rough idea of the values we cherished, since we both had the background of the Great Depression.

(1) We valued social capital more than financial capital. Neither money nor materials goods, beyond a certain level, result in a quality life.

(2) We both had a strong attachment to natural systems and needed to enjoy being in them as much as possible.

(3) We both read quite a bit, even though the selection of books was mostly different.

(4) We both enjoyed seminars of all kinds.

(5) In 1949, Jeannie discovered the Philadelphia Ethical Culture Society, which the entire family attended regularly.

All these values are part of the bonding that helped Jeannie and me cope better in the four years that Jeannie was in a nursing home and the previous three years of her "moderately" severe Alzheimer's. Sudden separation after over half a century of living together is a huge shock — especially when one of you cannot understand what is happening or why. In Jeannie's early days in the Warm Hearth nursing home, her face would crumple in distress when I appeared. Her reaction was as if she had never expected to see me again after my last visit. I visited her three times daily, most commonly at mealtime. The husbands of two other women were generally there at these times also. At this time, I also began a greeting ritual (see Chapter 39 in this volume) when I first saw her each time. The sameness of this ritual either worked or Jeannie's Alzheimer's shut out the memory of our former life together. I am convinced that the ritual worked because Jeannie was much more serene than other patients I saw with Alzheimer's. More important, the "old" Jeannie returned occasionally for brief intervals.

When Jeannie was in the intermediate stage of Alzheimer's, someone might tell her about an award that had been given to me. She listened and then, her eyes twinkling, she'd say "BIG DEAL." The Jeannie whose comments I always loved had returned briefly. She believed that honors and awards should never distract from the work that gave me satisfaction, and she was reminding me of that message. I was deeply touched that she transcended Alzheimer's to remind me!

The day Jeannie died, February 21, 2005, our daughters Karen and Heather were beside her bed, singing songs they had learned from Jeannie as children. Suddenly, she was gone — peacefully and quietly. When Heather appeared in the doorway of the dining room of the assisted living facility, no words were needed —– we just hugged each other. Karen remained at the hospital to make the final arrangements and accompanied Jeannie's body to the funeral home.

At the memorial service for Jeannie, preceded by the playing of the Zillertaler Lendler, our favorite folk dance, our minister Christine Brownlie, who had never known the pre-Alzheimer's Jeannie, gave a splendid eulogy of Jeannie's life based on a series of comments by Karen, Heather, and me. Then Karen, Heather, and Duncan gave brief descriptions of Jeannie's life (Stefan could not leave work but was part of the Colorado distribution of her ashes). I wisely did not attempt to say anything — it was too soon. Karen thanked Jeannie's companions who were with her constantly during the days she resided in the nursing home. She always had someone sitting with her; I believe this companionship contributed to the quality of her life.

When people have been strongly attached for many decades, one can accept death in the sense of finality of physical presence, but I have wanted to retain her values and thoughts — for example, on the drive from Blacksburg to the University of Michigan Biological Station is a rest stop that includes a small hill. When the VW microbus stopped, Jeannie would say "everybody run up the hill – you, too, Cairns." I was Johnny most of the time, but the use of "Cairns" meant an important message was being given. In this instance, a brief run up a small hill eliminated the kinks and raised the spirits after hours and hours of driving. The entire family enjoyed it, and it benefited us all. In another instance, we would return from a day of whitewater folboating on the New River, weary and wet, and Jeannie would say “OK, Cairns, let’s get a move on or we’ll be late for folk dancing.” Also, when something discouraging would happen professionally, she would say “OK, Cairns, you can rise above that.”

Jeannie had a wide range of interests in books. They were mostly about ethical values and interesting people, including such factors as autism. She would tell me about the books with an attitude ranging from glee to awe. Her interests in seminars and courses ranged from Paul Buck’s alpine plants course at Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in Colorado to Rex Low’s algae course at the University of Michigan Biological Station. I was determined that anything important to Jeannie would become important to me. Consequently, in her intermediate stage of Alzheimer’s, I was able to point out and name some of the species that she had years before pointed out to me. Jeannie had made a tapestry, with Heather’s help, that displayed some of the protozoan species involved in my research. It was always displayed in our houses and now hangs in the living room of my apartment in the assisted living facility — I can see it each time I look up from my writing table.

Jeannie and I never talked much about death and old age, although she lost her father when she was 13, and I lost my mother when I was 19. We both believed in living life fully. My brush with death on the Amazon River survey reminded us that life is risky. My response was to increase life insurance and take out nursing home insurance for both of us while still in my early 40s. Then I went back to enjoying life. We both tried to keep physically fit, but only by activities we enjoyed, such as hiking, swimming, folk dancing, and whitewater folboating. We also ate a good diet. Even when we were middle aged, all these activities continued, although whitewater folboating become too strenuous earlier than the other activities.

Jeannie and I agreed that neither of us wished to be in a nursing home. However, since I was with Jeannie about three times daily while she was in the nursing home, I have changed my mind. For someone with Alzheimer’s, who appears tranquil, a nursing home may be the best solution, if the family can afford it. However, most people in the United States do not care for visiting nursing homes because old people are supposed to be in the “golden years” and many clearly are not.

Based on my personal experience and assumption, last stage Alzheimer’s patients are more aware of human interactions, at least with people whom they encounter for at least several hours daily, than most people think they are. Even if this assumption is not valid, I would have continued my interactions with Jeannie in the same way. My life with her made any other choice unthinkable. Photo albums of family pictures and our life together got Jeannie’s attention, especially when each picture was accompanied by a commentary. The bird feeders outside her window kept her attention, as did rides in a wheelchair in her last year to see the forest that surrounded the nursing home. One of her companions brought Jeannie in her wheelchair down the hill to the assisted living building to see me. I met them in the lobby, and I went through our personal Alzheimer’s greeting ritual (Chapter 39 in this volume). I am convinced it helped assure Jeannie that all was well in a strange lobby. I also feel that being around the protozoan wall hanging she had made, her father’s handmade wood carving, and the usual piles of books and reprints that had always been standard in our home reassured her that the strange apartment I lived in was a comfort.

When I reflect on our long life together and why we retained our strong attachment to each other, I believe our focus on values rather than issues of daily life made this bond possible. When we finally moved into our first house, I made breakfast often for our two young children when I was at home. The value was that each of us should do a fair share of the mundane but essential chores. After the children were gone from the house, I continued to make breakfast frequently. In the early stages of Jeannie’s Alzheimer’s, I did all the cooking. Another value was that each of us should have time for creative activities of our choice. Jeannie’s choices varied from fair housing petitions to craft fairs. My interests were mostly centered on trout fishing, which I could only enjoy in the years after my research programs were established. Many values were shared — ethics, the outdoors, service (campus YMCA activities), and books written by people we admired. We agreed that all our children should have a good education and opportunities for developing creative activities. Our houses had to be sited in natural systems to the greatest extent possible. Only two of our houses did not fit this requirement, and we only lived in them for about five years total. Well before the field station era ended in 1995, the entire family, including the four children, their spouses, and grandchildren, met from Christmas to New Year’s Day at St. George’s Island on the Gulf Coast of Florida, not far from Tallahassee. During these memorable periods, the entire family got reacquainted. Our last such meeting was at nearby Bluestone State Park in West Virginia because I feared taking Jeannie on a long trip. We rented three small cabins adjacent to each other (the park was nearly empty at that time) and had a wonderful time hiking and tobogganing on the snow despite the frigid temperatures. We were all together in a natural system.

In February 2000, Jeannie and I moved to a townhouse in Warm Hearth Village, a retirement village at the edge of Blacksburg, where we had lived for nearly 32 years. The townhouse was surrounded by huge trees, and a 6-mile hiking trail ran through the forest. On the edge of Warm Hearth is Huckleberry Trail, a converted railroad track bed between Blacksburg and the neighboring town of Christiansburg. Jeannie and I were still able to walk together until June 2001, when Jeannie was hospitalized in nearby Montgomery Regional Hospital with blood clots in her left lung. She went directly from the hospital to the nursing facility in Warm Hearth — she never lived in the townhouse again.

When we moved to the townhouse, Jeannie kept commenting that something was wrong. Before this time, she was worried about Alzheimer's because she saw a difference in herself when she spent time on some of her interests, each of which required mental alertness. I had difficulty reassuring her that she was fine; then the classical symptoms of dementia appeared. At this time, I could only hug her – words were not adequate.

We had always slept peacefully and soundly in a queen-sized bed. Definitely reassuring is the presence of a person who has been there for most of your life and with whom you have done so much in so many places. Even after the 10 years that I have been alone, it does not yet seem natural. When one loves a person deeply, loss brings pain. I feel that many years of love more than compensates for a few years of pain.

For a couple to die simultaneously, except in a car accident or some similar event, is fairly rare. In the absence of an accident, the survivor is usually the woman, not the man. The bereaved person usually turns to activities he or she is familiar with. My two activities are writing and walking. In the 1980s, John Tanton of Petoskey, MI, urged me to write my autobiography. Before he made the suggestion, I had never thought about such a venture. At present, writing for the volume is my favorite way to awaken memories of loved ones and the "good old days." In the 1990s, I dictated a few chapters that were transcribed by Teresa Moody and Eva Call, who were secretaries for me at the time. I never did much with the chapters until my daughters Karen Cairns and Heather Chambers urged me to establish a website. Heather set it up for me (www.johncairns.net). Both the autobiography and the website are now major factors in my life. They reached that status when I could no longer be with Jeannie continuously but 2-3 times a day. Kathy Brady (nee Osgood), Centerville, PA, has been extremely helpful in helping me remember Jeannie's life as a college student at Penn State. Tom Dolan IV has recalled events for me in the formation of the river survey team at the Academy of Natural Sciences (ANSP), Philadelphia, PA, and has kept me apprised of my mentor's (Ruth Patrick) health and activities. My granddaughter, Laura Cairns Chambers, is now in the Peace Corps in a small village in the Peruvian Andes about 35 miles from the village of Tingo Maria where the ANSP river survey team began studies of the upper Amazon (Chapter 44 in this volume). Even now, Christopher Densmore, Curator, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA, is kindly attempting to trace Dr. Stevens (medical doctor) who held Sunday evening discussions for students at Penn State on Society of Friends (Quaker) and other ethical values. Those evenings were very important to Jeannie, and I hope to thank Dr. Stevens and acquire more information about that part of Jeannie's life.

Writing an autobiography surely exposes gaps in my own knowledge of the past: How did my father meet my mother? How did my mother feel about moving from a city, Philadelphia, to a small mill town, Conshohocken, which were both in southeastern Pennsylvania? Even though I may never be able to answer these questions, I have been helped by writing this autobiography.

We do not get to choose how our life, or that of our spouse, will end, but the value system we develop during the good years will prepare us for the tough years, whatever they may bring. The Great Depression demonstrated to both Jeannie and me that, while some money is essential to provide food, clothing, and shelter, anything beyond that (more money or more material goods) is not necessary for a quality life. When our income finally rose beyond the amount necessary to provide the basics, we saved the rest for emergencies.

Alzheimer's seems to be increasing and occurring at earlier ages. Many long goodbyes have already been experienced by large numbers of people, and the number may well increase. Each situation has unique aspects, so empathy will be expressed in many different ways. Although I made many errors (in retrospect), I do not regret the basic path I chose in dealing with Jeannie's Alzheimer's. I recommend spending a significant amount of time daily with loved ones who are afflicted because I now believe they are more aware of their limited worlds than they appear to be.

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