
New Every Day

NAVIGATING ALZHEIMER'S

WITH GRACE AND COMPASSION

DAVE MEURER



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To my amazing wife, Dale,
who has risen to each challenge
with grace and compassion.

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Last, and by no means least, I want everyone to know that my sons Mark and Brad have been truly wonderful to their grandmother.

ONE

Sweet Little Lies

I find myself making the most outrageously misleading statements these days. I tried at first to avoid outright falsehoods, out of deference to one of the Ten Commandments, but quickly realized that *misleading* and *flat-out lies* are pretty much two sides of the same coin. Any reasonable jury would convict me of flagrant and deliberate deceit. And then they would give me a standing ovation as I accept my Oscar for Best Actor.

My creative misuse of the English language spares me the heartbreaking task of, once again, informing my eighty-six-year-old mother-in-law, Karin, that her husband has been deceased for years. And my trickery is precisely what the doctor ordered.

Karin (pronounced like “put the *car* in the garage”) and I regularly have these kinds of conversations:

Karin: “I haven’t seen Gene all morning. Do you know where he is?”

Me: “Well, you know those truck drivers. It seems like they’re always on the road.” (Attempt to dodge the question.)

Karin: “Is he in Oregon?”

Me: “He’s picking up a load as we speak.” (Massive whopper.)

She breathes a sigh of relief.

Karin: “I feel so much better. I was worried when he wasn’t at breakfast.”

Me: “He had to leave early. He said he hopes you have a nice day.”

If I were Pinocchio, my nose would be in an entirely different solar system by now.

Welcome to the wild and woozy world of Alzheimer’s disease, a slow but inexorable attack on the brain that creates massive confusion, memory loss, and increasingly diminished capacity to carry out the functions of daily life. Anything you said yesterday, or even five minutes ago, can be startling news.

Karin: “Why do I have this cast on my arm?”

Me: “You took a fall last week and fractured your wrist.”

Karin: “Well, this is the first I’ve heard of it! Somebody should have told me about it!”

Me: “Sorry about that. We’ll try to do a better job of communicating.”

Karin: “I should hope so!”

We have now had that conversation dozens of times. For Karin, it is new every day.

But the person with Alzheimer’s disease isn’t the only one who is going to be off-kilter. Family and friends find themselves scrambling to come up with some kind of appropriate

and calming reply to a series of decidedly peculiar comments, such as this exchange:

Karin: “There are six children living in my bathroom, and they need to go home.”

Me: “Those rascals. I’ll call their parents to pick them up.” (Attempt to relieve her concern.)

Karin: “I don’t know how they keep getting in.”

Me: “Say, you are looking lovely today! I see you’re wearing your favorite blouse.” (Attempt to redirect her to a new subject.)

Karin: “I’ve never worn this before.”

Me: “Ah. Yes. My mistake.” (Never argue with someone who has Alzheimer’s.)

Karin: “I’ve been camping in the wilderness for weeks!”

Me: “That must have been quite an adventure! Tell me more!” (Just roll with it.)

The World Health Organization estimates that, worldwide, roughly fifty million people have dementia, and that Alzheimer’s disease constitutes 60 to 70 percent of cases. About five million of those cases are in the United States.¹

One of those cases is Karin.

And, since you are reading this, it is likely the disease has taken hold in the life of someone you love.

I’m so sorry. I know what you are going through.

No one plans to have Alzheimer’s disease crash into the life of a loved one any more than someone plans on being involved in a train wreck. But a problem never asks you if it is a convenient time to barge in the door.

“Not ready for a crisis? No worries. I’m flexible. Tuesday work for you? No? How about next week? I’m wide open at

11:00 a.m. on Friday. I may be a disaster, but I'm reasonable. Let's make this a win-win."

Doesn't happen that way.

Alzheimer's disease is one of those tragic events that elbows into your life, hurts someone you love, breaks your heart, bewilders your mind, disrupts your plans, impacts your finances, and consumes enormous amounts of time and emotional energy.

You need to sit down with a friend who is in the same boat, commiserate, share what has and hasn't worked, have a good cry, but also—importantly—have a good laugh at some of your mutual experiences. You need some joy on this hard slog of a journey. You can't go it alone. You need to be connected with someone who knows exactly what you are talking about when you shake your head and explain how you keep finding potato chips in Dad's underwear drawer.

Maybe I can play the role of a friend like that. (You still need to find someone who can actually take you out for coffee and a massive slice of coconut cream pie, but maybe I can pinch-hit for a bit.)

When I say you need to laugh, let me make it clear that we aren't laughing at our loved one or making light of the disease. But the situation you're in has the potential to drag you into a dark cave. I have read all kinds of books and articles on Alzheimer's disease, and while they have been informative and helpful, they are generally dry and, honestly, kind of depressing. I believe we need some laughter as we make our way down this long and painful road. And when something happens that makes you laugh, it's healthy to enjoy the moment.

Karin: “People keep saying I have that thing. What is it they say I have?”

Me: “Memory loss.”

Karin: “Well, I don’t!”

As is so often the case, the disease had been slowly unfolding for years. Karin had been mentally slipping for quite some time, but she was still living on her own. Cooking. Dressing herself. Visiting with other residents in the Happy Cedars Community for Dynamic Seniors (not the real name of the joint, but something equally excessive cooked up by marketing people with too much time on their hands).

My wife, Dale, and I visited Karin often, and thus began seeing the signs that her condition was worsening. Perishable groceries stored in the cupboard instead of the refrigerator. Her inability to operate the television remote control. The repeated surprise that Ronald Reagan wasn’t still president, let alone not still breathing.

We decided to bring her to our home for the weekend to keep an eye on her and take her to the doctor the following Monday.

It was a bit after two o’clock in the morning when we had the rather arresting experience of having a police officer stand in our bedroom and shine his flashlight in our faces while explaining that he was responding to a 911 call.

“There mused be some kinder mistake,” I mumbled, blinking.

“Well, there is a confused elderly woman in your living room,” he replied.

Ah. Yes.

My wife and I threw on our robes and joined the officer in the front room.

“Ma’am, do you know these folks?”

“Yes. That is my daughter and that is the man who drives the big brown van. But I have never been in this place before, and my husband is missing. So I called 911.”

(“Man who drives the big brown van?” I drive a Chrysler 300.)

I was punchy, disconcerted, and completely out of my element, so I stupidly replied, “Karin, you have been to our house a thousand times. And Gene passed away two years ago.”

She looked utterly stunned.

“Well, this is the first I’ve heard of it,” she replied softly.

I have learned a great deal since that ordeal, both by reading voraciously and availing myself of the wisdom of the professionals who are helping us navigate Alzheimer’s disease.

“Enter her world, and don’t try to correct her misperceptions,” is one of the best pieces of advice I have received.

If she believes she spoke with her parents on the phone an hour ago, we now say, “I hope you had a good conversation.” If she tells Dale she is working the evening shift at the hospital, my wife tells her what a valued employee she is. If she tells me she flew to Europe last night and asks me how they managed to get her back in time for breakfast, I simply ask, “Isn’t it amazing what they can do these days?” And then I point out how beautiful the roses are.

With Alzheimer’s or another type of dementia, sometimes the best you can do is provide peace in the moment. Often we find we can also bring joy. The standard biblical conventions about speaking the truth don’t apply when you are dealing with someone with this disease. What good comes from making a loved one relive the loss of a spouse or parents when she

is under the happy illusion that everyone she has ever loved is alive and well? Why feel the need to correct her if she says she spent the morning milking the cows? Just thank her for being such a great help on the farm.

So I thank the Academy for this Oscar, which I am happy to share with my wife for her supporting role in the zany comedy titled, *Of Course We Didn't Hide the Car Keys*.