

EDITOR'S NOTE

The ancient Greeks had a particular genius for myths about the cruelties dealt by fate, the gods and each other. One of their cruelest was the tale of the cocky young satyr Marsyas and his challenge to the god of music, Apollo.



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STEINER

Marsyas had snatched up the double-reed flute discarded by the goddess Athena and began to play with such proficiency, with such audacity, that Apollo took him to task. When Marsyas refused to bow to the divine virtuoso, a challenge was thrown down: whoever the Muses decided was the better musician could inflict any punishment he wanted on the other.

As Muses would, they chose Apollo. And Apollo chose to hang Marsyas by his hooves from a low tree where his flesh — the hairy hide of his lower body and the tender skin of his upper torso — was peeled off piece by piece, layer by layer. According to the poet Ovid's story, before he died the bleeding satyr cried to the god, "Why are you stripping me from myself?"

That's my image of Alzheimer's: the slow, certain, painful dismantling of all we deem to be at the heart of our identity and personhood.

This issue of *Health Progress* considers the definitions and descriptions of Alzheimer's and other dementias, along with the crushing numbers of people who are, or likely will be, affected, and what dementia is costing individuals, families, insurers, caregivers, health care and the national economy.

In response to the facts and projections are articles that describe practical approaches to care of people with dementias: the soothing use of touch; the calming parameters of routine, eye contact and familiar activities; and the comfort found in music or the tastes and aromas of favorite foods (my own kids are instructed to bring jelly donuts to the Home). There are ethical reflections on the reaches and confines of treatment. And in all, there is respect for the dignity of the

person and an acknowledgement of the truth and depth of the suffering.

Special thanks to the authors whose articles appear in this issue. They not only shared their experience and expertise in dealing with a devastating disease, but many of them bravely described the journeys they have traveled with people they have loved. Extra thanks to Becky Urbanski of Benedictine Health System, who both wrote an article about caregiving in her ministry and served as a guest co-editor, helping us shape the issue and read articles as they came in.

Left to his fate and the elements, poor Marsyas ends up as a pile of bones — not unlike those the prophet Ezekiel found scattered in the plain to which the Lord brought him (Ezekiel 37:1-14). In the vision of the bones, the Lord asks Ezekiel if a man could be made from those bones, to which the prophet answers, "You alone know that." Ezekiel then watches as God re-assembles the bones into skeletons, fills them with organs and tissue and sheathes them with skin, before his breath of life makes them women and men again.

Added to the certainty of what will be undone and our faith in what someday will be revived is our human call to witness. Unlike Ezekiel, we're rarely invited to see the reconstruction. Much more often, especially in cases of Alzheimer's and other dementias, we are called to witness the undoing and to accompany the people we care for in that devastating process.

There is nothing revolutionary in this issue: no cures in the offing, no patented means of prevention, no credible predictions of fewer patients or reduced costs. It is just a reiteration of the utterly revolutionary Christian message that suffering — even in the confused and painful diseases of dementia — can be meaningful and, finally, redemptive.

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