

Chapter Four

What the Ancient Greeks Can Teach Us about Dementia and Where Western Literature Has Left Us

“As for your father (King Laertes), he keeps to his own farm – he never goes to town-with no bed for him there, no blankets, glossy throws; all winter long he sleeps in the lodge with servants, in the ashes by the fire, his body wrapped in rags. But when summer comes and the bumper crops of harvest, any spot on the rising ground of his vineyard rows he makes his bed, heaped high with fallen leaves, and there he lies in anguish... with his old age bearing hard upon him too, and his grief grows as he longs for your return.”

The Odyssey, Book 11: 216-224

Often when I give talks on Alzheimer’s and dementia care, I start by asking the room a simple question; in all of Western literature, what was the first disease described in detail? From the Bible, to Gilgamesh, the Upanishads, to Homer; what was the first disease recorded by the author with accurate precision? People will immediately answer leprosy,

polio, cancer, or heart disease. No, I tell them that the disease was probably Alzheimer's. The book was Homer's *Odyssey*, and the afflicted character was Laertes, *Odyssey's* father. By turning to this story I think we can learn from their model of care and in doing so, it may point to a direction for us and help inform our ideas.

Most of us think we know the story of "The *Odyssey*". *Odysseus*, King of Ithaca, goes off to fight in the Trojan War to save the honor of Helen, and ransack the city of Troy. The war lasts ten years, and the city falls due to his ploy of the Trojan horse.

The Greeks all leave for home, but on the way, *Odysseus* blinds the cyclops *Polyphemus*, who happens to be the son of *Poseidon*, God of the sea, and earns his father's enmity. *Odysseus* is thus kept away from home for an additional ten years fighting monsters and seducing goddesses. But the overarching theme, despite some cynics, is that *Odysseus* is desperate to return home to his wife, son, parents, and kingdom.

But what is taking place in Ithaca in his absence is murky at best. It seems that when news of the homecoming of other Greeks become widely known, the men of Ithaca come to believe King *Odysseus* has drowned at sea, and began to seek the hand of his wife *Penelope*, in marriage. It appears that there are scores of them and as they wait for her decision, they pillage her kitchen, drink her wine, plot the murder of her son,

and have sex with her servants. This pillaging goes on for years. But where is Laertes, her father in law? The former king of Ithaca? That former King was living in rags in the goat shed. Why?

We know from other sources that Laertes was a vigorous leader, and in his youth he served under Jason on the voyage of the Argonauts and participated in the hunt for the great Caledonian Boar. He possessed the title of King of the Cephalenians which included not only Ithaca but also of a larger area that included the surrounding islands and part of the mainland. We also learn he was vigorous in old age when he still has strength to draw arms in the final chapter of the poem.

Yet when we meet him in the Odyssey, he is wearing rags, living in the goat shed, and that twenty years earlier, before Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he peacefully transferred the kingship over to his loving son Odysseus

....."old lord Laertes.

He, I gather, no longer ventures into town
but lives a life of hardship, all to himself,
off on his farmstead with an aging serving woman
who tends him well, who gives him food and drink

when weariness has taken hold of his withered limbs
from hauling himself along his vineyards steep slopes.

Book 1, 219-226.

So a few questions need to be asked:

1. Why did Odysseus become king in a peaceful transfer of power when Laertes was relatively young?
2. Why would Laertes give up power right before Odysseus was leaving Ithaca for the Trojan War?
3. Why did Laertes live in the goat shed rather than the palace?
4. Why, despite his son's twenty year absence, did Laertes take no interest in political affairs, especially after the palace was overrun by dozens of suiters trying to secure Odysseus's wife hand in marriage that would disinherit her son Telemachus and in the process destroying their home?
5. And finally, why when Odysseus left Ithaca for Troy, did he leave his friend Mentor in charge of his estates and raising his son?

To help fill in the background and their behavior, we remember that Penelope loves Laertes and Odysseus, that

Laertes and Odysseus love each other, and that Telemachus looks like his father.

It seems obvious to me that Laertes had some form of dementia, probably Alzheimer's due to the young age he abdicated. Once this is accepted, the story starts to make sense.

I believe the reason Laertes lives in the goat shed rather than the palace is because this is where he was happy as a youth; he was taking joy in his long term memories. When Telemachus leaves his grandfather for a short journey in search of his father, Laertes goes into deep grieving and stops eating because he is reliving Odysseus' 20 year old departure to war. And when Telemachus returns it is decided that Laertes will be told of that return by his lifelong friend the old wet nurse, so that there be no confusion about false hopes regarding Odysseus.

And when Odysseus does finally return, he is not recognized by his father and Laertes is convinced of his identity only by showing him a childhood scare from a hunting accident. Then still uncertain, Odysseus finally only convinces his father of his identity by recalling the number of fruit trees they planted together decades earlier. "You gave me thirteen pear, ten apple trees and forty figs-and promised to give me, look, fifty vine rows...." All long term connections

All of these decisions and precautions only make sense if Laertes had dementia and was living in his long term memories.

One other detail is quite touching. After a period of years where Penelope's suitors were growing impatient, she came up with a ploy to buy time by declaring she needed to weave a burial shroud for the old ex-king. No one objected, even though this ruse went on for 4 years. Though he now lived in rags with the goatherds, he had been king and deserved an honorable burial. Laertes deserved dignity and respect regardless of his condition. Humm....

What is fascinating to me is that while Homer describes the disease, he never names or discusses it, as his audience needed no explanation. The only hints are when a herdsman said Laertes has grown "old before his time", and when Penelope says he is "hiding in the goat shed". I can only speculate that healthy Greeks then lived to an age where dementia was more common than in later times such as Medieval Europe. (Even today on the island of Ikaria the life expectancy is 10 years longer than the rest of Europe and one in three natives live into their 90's.) This is evident in their playwrights, Sophocles, and Aristophanes to name two. With them however, old age is often treated as dotage and foolish senility, but it is an obvious condition.

But this wrinkle in the story of Laertes went unnoticed during centuries of readings because the disease and symptoms vanished due to later shorter life expectancies. Even Cicero

writes in his book "On Old Age" that Laertes banished himself to the goat shed because he liked the healthy life of farming. That makes no sense in light of the first quote for this chapter above, or his indifference to the suiters' pillaging of his kingdom even when the life of his grandson is openly threatened.

What should be gleaned from this digression, are two points: One, the way that King Laertes was cared for was to relieve him of his responsibilities and allow him to return to his long term memories of his youth and the garden. He was exempted from not only his responsibilities, but also the strife of the palace. His family let him wander and wonder in a place that gave him comfort.

Secondly, he was given respect in every way. In a very real way, he never stopped being King. When Penelope weaved his shroud, it was for the King. When pre-cautions were made to communicate information about Telemachus' comings and goings, it was out of respect but also a realization that he was focused on his long term memories and that unnecessary confusion should be avoided.

I find it very interesting that beyond the Odyssey, dementia is rarely discussed after antiquity in Western literature. "Don Quixote" "King Lear", and "Gulliver's Travels", are some of the rare exceptions. And those are very bleak and dark, except perhaps for the corona of the sun; Cervantes. Old age and dementia was largely viewed as depressing, and

dementia often seen as some kind of inevitable madness. We wanted to read about the adventure of youth, bildungsroman themes, romance, war, and intellectual adventures. Youth!

These dark literary warning seems to foreshadow our current predicaments regarding our equally dark models of care in the 21 century. It seems that our great writers have laid a foundation for lowering expectations for the quality of the lives of our elders with dementia, and perhaps even helping to justify the selfish rationalizations of our society to make few efforts on their behalves.

Shakespeare's "King Lear" is a tragedy about a demented and self-destructive king gasping for love as he tries to relinquish power between his daughters, so he can retire. Like the Odyssey, the remarks about his senility are direct and poignant. He too apparently has "grown old before his time", and he even wonders early in the play, who is Lear?

"Does anyone here know me? This is not Lear. Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes? Either his notion weakens or his discernings are lethargied. Ha! Waking? tis not so. Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

Even he doesn't seem to recognize himself in his declining condition. And he spends most of his sleep deprived time in the playful childishly bantering with his loyal Fool. His ranting and paranoia lead not only to his death, but the destruction of everything and everyone he loved. In this

magnificent portrait of old age, but we are often reminded that Lear is more child than wise, and lives in some phantasmagoria in his imagination. But we read Lear not because we are drawn to him and his old age, but rather repulsed.

Jonathan Swift, in "Gulliver's Travels" writes of his encounter with the Struldbruggs. This has the feeling of Greek mythology and probably reflects his own, and his peer's impending old age and declining health. Like Tithonus, these Struldbruggs live forever, but without their youth. At first Swift sees great merit in immortality thinking both wealth and learning would be unending. However he quickly realizes the horror of great age. It seems that after about "four score" they become peevish, covetous, impotent, cold and abandoned". Quite simply, they are drawn to the vices of the "younger Sort". And after 80, they have no "Remeberence of anything but what they learned in their youth...." Even language and family are forgotten. They are considered dead before the law, and the least miserable are those that completely withdraw into "dotage". For Swift, like Shakespeare, old age was seen more a source of horror than succor.

It is only Cervantes, in "Don Quixote" who treats his demented main character with affection, respect and even possibly some reverence. The tale Cervantes tells us is about a 50 year old man who is passionate about tales of medieval chivalry, who after many sleepless nights and "much reading, his brains dried up and he went completely out of his mind". He decides he is in fact a valiant knight and sets off for a life of

anachronistic nobility, heroism, and virtue, in his 17th century modern commercial world.

And so he sallies forth saving damsels (milkmaids), fighting monsters (windmills), and freeing the oppressed (farm hands), all the while exhibiting classic signs of dementia. He has constant hallucinations, fails to recognize familiar friends, suffers from time disorientation (“three days passed in one hour”), and floats in and out of lucidity.

What makes this so curious, and perhaps profound, is that Cervantes is treating long term cultural memory as a virtue. He is using Don Quixote as a vehicle for a desirable collective failure of short term memory in favor of an embrace of long term virtues, no matter how mad. But in “Don Quixote”, while illustrating a disease process, Cervantes must have known well, he is using him as a metaphor for his world view. He used his observations as a way of indicting and criticizing the failings of his society, and did so, at the expense of a kind and noble fool. But this is still a collision between short and long term memories, but treated as a metaphore. Don Quixote dies a broken, and a profoundly ironic way, a disillusioned man. But the operative word is “broken”. And of course, unlike Homer, Cervantes doesn’t pretend to offer a model of care. Quixote is a literary device to carry a message of social commentary, and not mental health needs of our elders.

So from the antiquity to modernity, we have a problematic and dim view of aging. Rarely discussed, poorly pondered. Not

surprising we were caught so unprepared for the onslaught of dementia, in the 1970's. But to paraphrase Lincoln, then the plague came.