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ABOUT RELIGION

What Have We Forgotten?

By Norman Lamm

AM GRATEFUL my mother still recognizes me. She may not do so for long, but right now her face lights up when she sees me. My children have less luck; she seems to feel she ought to know them, so she pretends she does. We all see through the act. Her great-grandchildren are another story. She is repeatedly astonished that they even exist.

Like most of the others on her floor, she lives in her remote past, both sustained and terrorized by long buried pleasures and fears, loves and hates. She often calls for her mother, and mourns her

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"recently" deceased parents with genuine grief. Soon these memories, too, will be forgotten, as her malevolent disease destroys more and more of her brain cells. And then all the past will be a blank.

The family is helpless to do anything about it. My father and my siblings give her all our love and care, but that is simply not enough. That is the way Alzheimer's disease goes. The patient has no recollected past, and no conception of or interest in the future. Only the present counts. It is, as someone said, a radically existential situation.

My sadness at Mom's condition and sense of futility, despite the family's best efforts, are deepened by a suspicion that her sickness is somehow a metaphor for our culture, for a good part of modernity itself.

To live for now, without knowing the value of the past and the promise of the future — that is the skewed experience of an Alzheimer's society.



Mom's personal travail is our culture's collective malaise: a physical ailment in one case, a sickness of the soul in the other.

All analogies are flawed, and this one is, too. Mom's condition is different in certain significant ways from the pathology of modernity. For

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instance, she is obsessed with Friday. She wakes up thinking it is Friday, so she must get out of her wheelchair, rush home to clean the house, prepare the festive Sabbath meals, and light the Sabbath candles.

She is convinced that every day is "erev Shabbos," the eve of the Sabbath, and how would it look for her not to be prepared?

Would that our culture were stricken with some kindred anticipation of holiness yet to come, of great things about to happen, of imminent challenges to the best within us, of a restlessness for the beyond.

If not a past, at least we would cherish a future.