



Keith Lewis: Dad's Day

Having worked as an Occupational Therapist for over twenty years I have seen many people with various illnesses and problems. Most I have been able to empathise with, drawing on life experiences as a guide and imagining the increased pain or distress. I even felt that I was quite empathetic to people who suffer memory loss due to things such as dementia or brain injury, although I had never experienced anything like that in my life. That is until one day in February 2010.

Friday 12th February 2010 started as many days did with me shouting at my two youngest daughters, Hafwen (then 15) and Branwen (then 13), to get out of bed and get ready for school. The nagging hadn't been as intense as normal as I had the day off work and intended to drive them to school instead of them having to walk. After dropping them off, I drove the ten miles to Swansea which wasn't as bad as people had told me would be driving in rush hour. I had been lucky and worked in the opposite direction from home to the way everyone else was going, so driving with the "lemmings" was a novelty. The music shop I had come to Swansea for was closed when I got there, but a sign on the door said that it would open at 10 am. Only twenty minutes to wait, so I walked around a bit. Eventually, the lady appeared to open the shop so I and another customer walked in. On finding out that the late opening was due to the lady having a significant birthday, we wished her a happy birthday. I bought the three music stands I had come down for. The two girls and their older sister (Rhiannon, 18) were playing the harp for a wedding the following Sunday, they normally play by ear but had been asked to learn a "pop" song and had difficulty remembering it, and so needed "posh" music stands.

I drove home, dropping the stands off with the girl's mum on the route. After a nice cup

of coffee, I got into my work clothes and out into the garden to finish treating the decking I'd put up in the Autumn. I was all finished by 12.20 pm for lunch. I was back out by 1 pm this time to lay bricks around the lawn. This is where things start to go hazy. I remember I was getting frustrated laying the bricks but can't remember why or finishing it. It's then sometime between 2 and 3 pm and I'm talking on Facebook with my son, Morley (24) who was working in Blackpool.

Then nothing.

Next, it's 10.00 pm and I'm in a hospital room with Rhiannon and my older brother Philip. I ask them "what's happened?" and they both laugh!

Then nothing.

10.30 pm and I'm in a hospital room with Rhiannon and Philip. I start to ask what had happened but something's telling me that I've already asked, so apologetically I say "I may have asked before but what's happened?". Phillip replied that they didn't know but I had called an ambulance, and Morley was on his way from Blackpool.

Then nothing.

It's just before midnight and I'm in a hospital room with Philip, Morley and a doctor. The doctor says something about a scan and that I can go home. He goes out of the room so I try and get off the bed, I then realise that there is a drip in the back of my left arm.

Then nothing.

I don't know the time but I'm in Morley's car with Morley, Ria (his partner) and Philip. Then I'm at home with just Ria, drinking tea.

Then nothing.

Then I'm waking up at 7.30 am wondering if I've had a bad dream. No, it seems too real for



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a dream, but if it's real, where are the bits that aren't there? So, it must be a dream. I get up to cross the landing, there are Morley and Ria's bags in the hall. I finish in the bathroom and go back to bed to try and remember. I keep going through the things above but "why are there gaps?"

At 9 am I decide to get up, Ria is up shortly after so I ask her what happened but can't remember her reply. When Morley gets up I ask him but am conscious that I'm not asking for the first time. As the morning goes on, I'm apologetically asking again, but he can only fill in bits that he has been told and I find it hard to retain any of the information anyways.

Over the next few days, I am conscious that I am asking the same questions as I want to know what has happened, and that the loved ones I'm asking are getting fed up with the constant questioning, so decide not to ask so often. In fact, I probably still kept asking occasionally for months after as if over time they would remember bits and fill in the void, with the hope that the information from them would trigger memories.

The bits I can now add from talking to them, are that the conversation on Facebook with Morley in the afternoon was "normal" except that this was the first time I'd spoken on Facebook. I think I may have spoken to an acquaintance at the same time but am not close enough to them to ask if I made sense. At about 6 pm I phoned for an ambulance, none of my family know why. When the first responder arrived, I gave them my ex-wife's telephone number as if we were still married and when he phoned there, Rhiannon had run the 100 yards up the road to my house. I hadn't recognised her when she arrived. Which I think must be awful for any 18-year-old, but more so as we are quite close. She had called my brother who had got a lift down

to the hospital, while Rhiannon had driven behind the ambulance. While I had been waiting in the hospital Philip and Rhiannon had been telling me jokes, actually the same joke over and over again, as every time I had laughed as if it was the first time I had heard it. They had lost track of how many times I had asked what had happened, I think it was many times before the one I remember at 10 pm.

The doctors on the night had told the family that it was probably due to scarring on the brain due to a previous stroke but the scanner was not working and so I would need a scan in the near future, which I had about two months later, which showed nothing. I returned to work a month after the incident, although my memory generally wasn't right until August.

It's only now that I've started to write this down and discuss with Morley what I'm doing that we've compared accounts of the week after that I find that there are many "forgotten moments" during the following weeks.

However, it's only recently that I've come to realise how it must be for someone with a permanent memory problem. The frustration of feeling that you have forgotten something, but knowing that asking for an explanation from the family is generating frustration for them. The internal torment of wanting to know, not being able to remember, and not wanting to ask loved ones. This I think must be like someone with early dementia where they have some insight into the problem, it's a dark and quite frightening place. The part of the day I have no recollection of must be like someone with more advanced dementia, however, as I can't remember it, I can't say how it felt. All I can say is that I now treat my elderly confused patients with a greater understanding of what they are going through.

Keith