



AND A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

It seems that she had been crying ever since she came to the nursing home five weeks ago. It was hard on her only daughter, Marie, to make the arrangements for her mother, Rose, to be placed in the home. She had to deal with so much guilt over the placement and she struggled with it ever since her father, Joe, died about three years ago. But she had three children at home ranging in age from five to eleven and who required a tremendous amount of attention and care from her. Those circumstances just wouldn't allow her to give her mother the care that she required and deserved. And now, despite what the social worker had indicated about the "normal adjustment period", her mother's constant crying and asking to go back home was unbearable and it far exceeded the time element that the social worker had indicated was "normal".

Actually, Nana...that's what they all called Rose in keeping with Italian tradition...was very young. She was only sixty two. It was such a waste of a beautiful, bright, giving, talented and loving woman but the Alzheimer's diagnosis sometimes made her revert to being a little child who just couldn't be trusted to care for herself. She would leave the house without saying anything and just wander the neighborhood. Either her husband or a neighbor would spot her and, knowing that she had a medical problem, they would bring her back home. Oftentimes she would cook something and leave the burner lit after she finished. Joe kept a close eye on her and while he was alive they were able to do pretty well. His death seemed to make her condition even worse. They had been married for over forty years and had come to rely on each other for so much.

Thankfully, Marie's husband, Jim, was a very loving and supportive man who helped Marie through the tough times of placing her mother in the nursing home. He, too, was very close to Rose and would be the first to suggest that his mother-in-law come for dinner early and play with the children. She was a wonderful grandmother who doted on the children as grandparents should and they all loved her and being around her. She would play simple little games with them that she enjoyed playing while growing up in the old neighborhood. She was the eldest of eight children and it seemed that she was caring for someone her whole life. She was very close to both her family or origin and marriage. She had many friends. She was much loved and respected by everyone. And that's what made her being placed in a nursing home so difficult for Marie. Her mother

had spent most of her life caring for others and now her daughter was unable to care for her. Apart from the obvious guilt that Marie was feeling as a result of that fact, culturally the expectation was that children should care for their parents in their “old age”.

Now, it happened that Joseph, Marie’s second eldest child who was seven was experiencing some problems of an emotional nature. He was a quiet youngster who kept to himself a good deal and seldom if ever spoke his feelings. He was having problems in school both academically and socially. The other children were making fun of him and trying to goad him into becoming angry. Anger was the emotion he was most capable of expressing. Otherwise, there was a “lifeless” look in his eyes...almost as if he were depressed. His older brother would often come to Joseph’s rescue by fending off the children who were taunting him and that often resulted in some physical confrontations which, of course, would invite even more reactions from Joseph’s peers.

Jim and Marie were beside themselves. They just didn’t know what to do to help their son. They tried talking with him, pleading with him, bribing him and punishing him but nothing seemed to work. He would cry and promise to contain himself but the pattern of his attitude and behavior persisted. His withdrawal seemed to become even more pronounced after the episodes of anger and confrontation occurred. It was clearly a “vicious circle”.

One day, Marie was talking with a girlfriend when the subject of animals came up. Her friend indicated that she and her husband finally gave into their daughter’s persistent requests for an animal. She, too, was a “clean freak” and felt that the work necessary to take care of an animal was more than she would bargain for but they gave in and bought a hamster. She went on to say that her daughter’s attitude had changed dramatically since they purchased the pet in that she was acting more responsibly and seemed much happier. Marie knew her daughter and realized that Joseph’s quiet withdrawn nature was very much the same.

She went home and talked with Jim and after much discussion, they decided to talk with Joseph and the rest of the family about getting a pet. Naturally, all of the children were very enthusiastic about the idea but Joseph’s reaction was very different. For the first time, she saw “life” in his eyes. He became animated and began to plead with them to get a dog. He promised that he would take care of it...bathe and feed it and do whatever was necessary to keep him in the house. Interestingly, his siblings didn’t seem to mind his talking about getting a pet and commandeering its care...they just wanted a pet.

Now, it should be noted that in many respects, Marie followed in her mother’s footsteps in her maintaining a clean home. In fact, it seemed that all Marie did was clean despite Jim’s objections that she was working too hard. Her mother would say “you can eat off the floors in my house” to indicate how proud she was of her cleaning frenzy. In light of all of that, one could understand why Marie would “drag her heels” in consenting to get a dog. But she was desperate and conceded while realizing that her cleaning role would probably need to intensify.

Well, Champ was the “pick of the litter” and was chosen to become a full-fledged member of the family. He was the furriest, funniest and the most “in need of affection” of all of the other puppies. In a word, he was “cute”. When exposed to the choice of which puppy they would bring home, Joseph was the first to speak up and say “I want that one”. His siblings seemed to agree and so it came to pass that Champ became the extra mouth to feed.

Almost immediately, Joseph took over the chores associated with having a pet. He worked with the dog after listening to the breeder’s suggestions as to how to toilet train the dog and followed his recommendations to a “T”. He fed, bathed, groomed and played with the dog whenever he had the chance. But the most interesting part of the story is that Joseph’s attitude and behavior changed. He began to smile more and seemed to enjoy taking care of Champ instead of begrudging his role as parents might come to expect of a youngster. He would spend extended periods of time with Champ in his room just talking with the animal about his day in school, his feelings about things that happened to him during the day and even how unfair he thought his parents were when they would discipline him sometimes.

Realizing that expressing himself was a new phenomenon, his parents marveled at the changeover that occurred. And something else happened as well since Champ’s arrival. Instead of Marie doubling up her household cleaning routine, she would sit and play with the dog while the children were at school. There seemed to be a fresh, new attitude in the family all because of Champ’s presence in the home. About a month after they had the dog, Marie and Jim went to the school for their much dreaded teacher conference. They expected to hear that Joseph was behaving in ways similar to other times when they had gone for conferences but this time they were going to counter those reports by talking about the changed attitude they were observing at home. Instead, they were told that there seemed to be a significant difference in Joseph’s behavior over the last month or so. The teacher couldn’t explain why but it was welcomed. She indicated that his behavior was more appropriate and he was beginning to invest himself in forming friendships instead of inviting taunting and conflict.

Now, the family would religiously go to Nana’s nursing home every Sunday to see her. Every time they went, though, they were greeted with the same depressed, pleading attitude wanting them to return her to her own home because she just wasn’t happy there. Marie had talked with the social worker recently and was told that Rose was on a new medication which might hold her Alzheimer symptoms in check but it needed to take its course for several weeks before they could conclude whether or not it was the treatment of choice. The social worker also recommended that they bring Rose home with them for a good part of the day but her crying and depression created an aura that Marie and Jim felt would become a problem for the children. Recently, in fact, they decided to leave the children home when they went to visit because of the sadness it caused them to see their beloved Nana in that state.

Perhaps it was Marie’s wishful thinking but she saw a minute change in her mother’s behavior despite similar reactions as in the past. She seemed a bit more lucid and attuned

to the moment with a greater sense of emotional interaction with her family. Still, it offered a “ray of hope” that her mom would make a better adjustment. Then, one day, Joseph in his excitement ran out of his room after spending his time with his “best friend” and announced to his mother that he thought it would be a great idea if Nana could meet Champ. His reasoning for making the request was that he realized that Nana wasn’t happy and because Champ made him happy, maybe he could do the same for her. This came as a shock and so she put off making a decision by uttering her famous “we’ll see” response.

Actually she just wanted some time to discuss this with Jim. When they did, they both concluded that it couldn’t hurt anything and, besides, if it would help Joseph it would be worthwhile. Although grandparents aren’t supposed to have “favorites”, Joseph seemed to be her favorite. Apart from the fact that he was his grandfather’s namesake, Joseph’s withdrawal symptoms seemed to require a bit more attention from her than the other children and that’s what she was very good at doing...taking care of others.

And, so, Joseph and Champ accompanied their “parents” to the nursing home the following Sunday. Joseph’s exuberance was clearly visible. His parents said they were going to make arrangements for Nana to come outside so that she could meet Champ and so the dog wouldn’t bother the rest of the patients. In fact, she told Joseph, Champ probably wouldn’t be allowed in the home because of health laws.

Nana looked forlorn as she was wheeled out in a wheelchair to the garden area outside the main entrance. Her head was bowed in her usual depressed posture. When Joseph saw her he exclaimed “Nana, we have a surprise for you”. Upon hearing his voice, she raised her head slowly to see him proudly holding Champ in his arms. He ran to her and said “See Nana, this is the surprise. This is Champ”. And, as if introducing two humans he proclaimed “Champ, this is Nana”. At first, her face was expressionless. Slowly, ever so slowly, her eyes seemed to “lighten up” and a smile began to cross her lips. “Hello Joey” she finally said, “what do you have there?”

Joseph went into a detailed explanation of how he was the one who chose Champ from the litter and how he was the person mainly responsible for his care and how they’d spent many hours “talking” in his room and how Champ always listened and understood everything he was feeling and saying. Her faint smile broadened into a grin and she put her arms out as if to want to embrace her “Joey”. Of course, if she embraced Joey, she’d have to embrace Champ as well and Champ always liked hugs. As they embraced and almost immediately, Champ began licking Nana’s face.

Now, remember Nana’s attitude about animals. Attitude be damned. After kissing her grandson all over his face as she once used to do, she asked if she could hold the dog. Joseph gladly handed Champ over and the dog just cuddled up in her loving arms. Both Marie and Jim started to cry at the sight of this wonderful apparent transformation in Rose.

Well, to make what is probably too long a story just a bit shorter, Nana began asking to come to Marie and Jim’s home. She would play with the children in some ways similarly

as to her doing so previous to her diagnosis. However, she always left some time to play with Champ as well. There was a partial return to the Nana they all knew and loved. No one was sure whether it was the new medication or Champ's entrance into her life but no one really cared either.

Champ was given special permission by the nursing home administrator to visit...not just with Rose but with the other patients. In effect, Champ was adopted by the home. Most especially, those patients who seemed depressed or who shared in Rose's diagnosis were able to have that same smile turn into a grin as with Rose upon her first introduction to Champ. They just loved him. Another byproduct was that by virtue of Champ's involvement with the other patients and the reputation that was attributed to Rose, she once again started making friends. People began to confide in her as they had once done and she felt useful once again doing what she did best.

This is not a "miracle story" and although fictional, has been repeated many times in nursing homes throughout the country as administrative staffs have come to realize the therapeutic value that animals have on patients living in their confines. The positive effects are almost immediate and long-lasting. I have a veterinarian friend in the Buffalo, N.Y. area who encourages many of the owners of the pets that he treats to visit nursing homes on a regular basis. And we're not just talking about a diversion; we're talking about THERAPEUTIC VALUE. Many SPCA's throughout the country are instituting programs to help people come to realize the lessons taught as in this vignette. There certainly is something therapeutic about being able to talk with "someone" who always listens, never judges or interrupts and who gives the best advice that can be given...a nice wet kiss on the face.

A Brief Biographical History

After an over 40 year career as a professional psychotherapist and Director of The Sports Stress Clinic in Amherst, NY, Charles Bonasera came to Florida and decided to use the benefits of his previous professional experiences in his new roles of Consultant in Life Management and Business Coaching as well as his expertise as a Motivational Speaker. He once again became involved with athletes in different sports training them with his techniques to help them develop and maintain focus as well as staying in their zone. Much of his training methods are derived from the CD collection he developed under the heading of WIN-WIN SECRETS as the President of Personal Identity Controls. This collection consists of thirty-six programs dealing with vital issues in the management of stress.

Another role that he adopted to add to his professional career was that of Author. Early in the 1980's he wrote Guide to a Life Management Process which he has re-written as a workbook to successfully help people manage their stress which includes his own Working Model. As a result in his interest in golf and realizing that it was essentially a "mind game", he wrote The Mental Side of Golf which can benefit the beginner as well as professionals playing the game of golf.

He then compiled over five-hundred sayings that he had developed in the course of his professional career as stimuli to help people change patterns in their lives entitled How to Stay Well and Live Life to the Fullest. This was followed by a book documenting case studies around disruptive life patterns including ways to change them under the name of How in the Hell Did This Happen to Me? Both his personal involvement in sports as a participant, coach, manager and in his role in officiating, inspired him to write a primer for parents and coaches entitled The Legend of Little League.

Charles invites you to view his website at www.charlesmbonasera.com as well as to write with your comments and questions to his e-mail address (charles@charlesmbonasera.com). He would also be very happy to communicate with his readers by telephone should they desire. His professional motto is “seeking alternative methods to happiness” and wishes those touched by his words to practice the three secrets to a happy life: “enjoy life and enjoy it thoroughly ... develop and maintain a sense of humor ... bring as much love into your life as possible.