

## **A Mother's Love, Clarified**

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

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Date: Jul 13, 2006

The long dying of Louise Will ended here recently. It was time. At 98, her body was exhausted by disease and strokes. Dementia, that stealthy thief of identity, had bleached her vibrant self almost to indistinctness, like a photograph long exposed to sunlight.

It is said that God gave us memory so we could have roses in winter. Dementia is an ever-deepening advance of wintry whiteness, a protracted paring away of personality. It inflicts on victims the terror of attenuated personhood, challenging philosophic and theological attempts to make death a clean, intelligible and bearable demarcation.

Is death the soul taking flight after the body has failed? That sequence -- the physical extinguished, the spiritual not -- serves our notion of human dignity. However, mental disintegration mocks that comforting schema by taking the spirit first.

In the very elderly the mind can come and go, a wanderer in time, and a disintegrating personality can acquire angers and jagged edges that are, perhaps, protests against a growing lightness of being. No one has come back from deep in that foreign country to report on life there. However, it must be unbearably frightening to feel one's self become light as a feather, with inner gales rising.

Dementia slowly loosens the sufferer's grip on those unique tokens of humanity, words. An early sign is a forgetfulness that results in repetitiveness, and fixation on the distant past.

For a while, one of Louise's insistently recurring memories was of spring 1918, a war year, and eastbound troop trains passing through Greenville, Pa. When the trains stopped, residents offered candy and magazines to the soldiers -- but not to black units. That infuriated Louise's father, whose fury was a fine memory for Louise to have among those of a father who died at age 44.

To the end, even when virtually without speech, Louise could recognize her children, could enjoy music and being read to from love letters written 75 years ago by Fred, her future husband. She could even laugh, in spite of the

tormenting chasm between her remaining cognition and the prison of her vanished ability to articulate.

In 1951, in Champaign, Ill., for her 10-year-old son, she made a mother's sacrifice: She became a White Sox fan so she could converse with the argumentative Cubs fan who each evening dried the dishes as she washed. Even after much of her stock of memories had been depleted, she dimly knew that the name Nellie Fox (a second baseman) once meant something playful.

The aging that conquered Louise was, like war, a mighty scourge, and, like war, elicited nobility from those near its vortex. The nearest was Fred Will, who died eight years ago, at the end of his ninth decade.

A few years before his death, Fred, a reticent romantic, whose reticence may have been an effect of his tinge of melancholy, shared with his children some poetry he had written for Louise, including this from 1933:

The warm sun  
Beams through the clear air  
Upon glistening leaves.  
And the birds  
Sweep in long arcs  
Over the green grass.  
They seem to say,  
"This might last forever!"

But it doesn't.

But it lasted more than six decades, which is forever, as foreverness is allotted to us.

A retired professor of philosophy, Fred probably knew what Montaigne, quoting Cicero, meant when he said that to study philosophy is to prepare to die. Fred was, strictly speaking, philosophic about his wife's affliction. A common connotation of "philosophic" is placid acceptance of what can be comprehended but not altered. However, Fred's philosophic response to the theft of his wife by aging was much richer than mere stoicism grounded in fatalism. It was a heroic act of will, arising from clear-sightedness about the long trajectory of Louise's life.

He understood this stern paradox: Families seared by a loved one's dementia face the challenge of forgetting. They must choose to achieve what dementia

inflicts on its victims -- short-term memory loss. They must restore to the foreground of remembrance the older memories of vivacity and wit.

"All that we can know about those we have loved and lost," Thornton Wilder wrote, "is that they would wish us to remember them with a more intensified realization of their reality. What is essential does not die but clarifies. The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude." Louise, released from the toils of old age and modern medicine, is restored to clarity.

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