

Laptops, Dreams, & Modern Ministry with the Aging

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Abstract

Modern technology, when used thoughtfully, can be a marvelous stimulant for the spiritual memories, dreams and imaginations of the elderly. This article details experiences of Christians in a skilled-care nursing facility who use modern technology with their chaplain to explore God's work in their lives. These techniques can be readily adapted to senior ministries in churches, community centers and home visits with the elderly.

The resident had lost her speech without warning and was clearly frustrated. Her eyes told us she was alert, but she was also disoriented, for she had awoken unable to form any words. The staff suspected a small stroke as the cause and I was called in to sit with this woman as the medical team assessed what to do next.

I'm a modern day chaplain walking the halls of a Presbyterian nursing home with laptop in hand, on the hunt for minds to stimulate and stories to hear. I serve at Windy Hill Village of the Presbyterian Homes in Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, a skilled-care nursing facility in an area that used to be coal country. The residents I work with grew up "when coal was king," as they say it. Lives were hard when these people were young. Now in their eighties and nineties, they say they were raised to be independent and uncomplaining.

As I sat down with my mute friend, her eyes brightened but she couldn't form my name on her lips. So I repeated it slowly to her, and after a few minutes of watching my mouth shape the words, she was able say "Maarrtyyy" and nod her head to me.

Next, I opened my laptop and started showing this woman pictures of our community, where she spent most of her adult life. I had recently put together a slideshow of prominent buildings from the town to use in a Bible study. As I displayed the photo images, her eyes brightened and she began to form the names of the historic houses and businesses with difficulty at first, but then with more and more clarity and ease.

I asked her about her family and childhood. She was able to say the word "Huntingdon" clearly enough for me to recognize the name of the town where I teach philosophy at Juniata College. I retrieved digital images of buildings in Huntingdon from the Internet, and as I displayed them she expressed very haltingly that her father had worked at a locomotive boiler factory in Huntingdon when she was a child. A Google search gave me a picture of the factory building, which I recognized as a building I'd passed many times without knowing its history. My friend's eyes were alive with these images, while her mouth started moving more readily.

One fact from her childhood led to another. Each Internet picture led to other memories. Words formed on her lips more easily with each memory and within forty minutes from my arrival my friend was conversing normally with me. She was a talking miracle! One made possible by the digital tools I was able to carry with me in our modern facility.

I've thought about and researched various neurological explanations for what occurred that morning. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) would have, no doubt, revealed a stimulation of various memory centers in the brain, with little-used neural centers being excited where damaged ones lay unused. However, I cannot forget the spiritual component in the situation, for that is how my elderly Episcopalian friend frames her days. I and many of the

staff at Windy Hill Village acknowledged that the mystery of God surrounded her reawakening of speech.

Speech, broadly understood as the ability to stimulate and receive communication, is foundational to life and relationship. We see this evidenced in Christ's nature as the Word of God (the Logos) who comes to reestablish our right relationship with God.

Our speech conveys something of who we are to those around us. We use different voices—funny, dark, perplexing, stimulating, and more—to inform, motivate, challenge and love. All of this is stored and retrieved by our brains as we interact with the beings and world around us. It is essential then for spiritual caregivers to understand and use the best techniques to keep the mind and brain fit. By helping the aging person retrieve memories, form new conceptual connections, and express what is within them, the caregiver helps that person live into the image of God. Many of the modern tools available to chaplains, ministers and laypersons, when used well, are tremendous aids to enlivening minds with ideas and speech. Here are a couple of stories and guiding scriptures to illustrate how this can work practically.

But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy.

(Psalm 5:19, *NRSV*)

Another friend has Alzheimer's that has progressed to the stage where her short term memory is severely limited. Also, she has lost many memories from the past, most distressingly, memories of her family. She retains, however, the marvelous spiritual capacity to sing hymns she learned long ago and sang in public settings when young. If you start most any hymn, she can sing it with you, though she may not always know all the words.

She and I have had wonderful times in front of my laptop, using websites such as Nethymnal.org, singing hymns together in hallways and in her room. The advantage of this over a piano is that the laptop can easily go anywhere in

our facility and can project words for the resident and I to share. The MIDI file playback speeds can be adjusted in programs such as Microsoft's Media Player to suit the person's capacity for remembering and singing. My friend and I have even investigated the composer's lives, which interest her, though I know she'll not remember the facts later.

Such singing techniques can be adapted for in-home visits by pastors and caregivers. Most internet hymn sites allow you to save web pages to your computer and play them back when you select "work offline" in your internet browser. I store a few favorite hymns and Christian songs on my computer for easy access, for those times when an internet connection is unavailable. I also employ a number of DVD's for singing, such as the LifeTogether Worship Series™ from Maranatha Music and the Shout Praises Kids Series™ from Integrity Music, which can be carried to homes and other locations where the internet is unavailable.

You made it all, with Wisdom at your side . . . Oh, look—the deep, wide sea, brimming with fish past counting . . . and Leviathan, your pet dragon, romps in them.

(Psalm 104:24–26, *THE MESSAGE*)

Each Tuesday I lead a morning Bible study with 20–25 residents, who sit around a large U-shaped table. At the open end of the "U" I use a computer projector and sound system to project videos, digital images, PowerPoint shows, and hymns. One study, which is typical of what we do together, focused on the Genesis theme of God's creation of the sea with all its creatures. We projected and read together Genesis 1 using BibleGateway.com. We displayed pictures of the sea and spoke about its different zones. We Googled the "Mariana Trench" and investigated the bathyscaphe "Trieste". Using Google Earth, we flew over the oceans. I showed videos from my SeaWorld® vacation, connecting the images of Shamu with the "Leviathan" of Psalm 104:26 who frolics in the ocean.

The study ended with clips from *Finding Nemo* and the tune "Beyond the Sea," which tied into C.S. Lewis' theme in *The Chronicles of Narnia* of heaven as the land beyond the sea. Almost everyone had a sea-story to tell. Images, sounds, and scriptural connections were zooming around the room like fish through the water.

Countless other possibilities for using new tools to enliven minds, brains and spirits have opened up at our facility. Windy Hill invested in an interactive computing system called "It's Never Too Late," which provides historic videos, games, puzzles, and 3D tours of distant places.

During one men's group we discussed favorite cars and searched for images of them on the Internet. After displaying images and sharing stories, I gave the men a chance to get behind the wheel of the driving program on the system. One man, who'd recently given up his license because of Parkinson's, found this wonderfully enlivening as he listened to the rumble of the digital car and raced around a simulated road course in Monte Carlo.

The techniques described in this section can also be adapted for church settings and home visits by pastors, eldercare workers and laypersons. With a bit of planning, interactive Bible lessons that employ videos and music can be saved to a laptop hard drive and carried to the homes of elderly parishioners who might not be able to attend a Bible study. Computer based Bible software, such as the Logos Bible Systems™, are available with scalable fonts and audio playback to help minister to the visually impaired. Websites such as BluefishTV.com and Tangle.com offer downloadable videos that illuminate hymns and Biblical stories. Wii™ and PlayStation™ machines—normally thought of as entertainment for the young—can be easily carried to the homes of shut-ins and become a source of community building between the young and old. The technology available to many church families—game players, smart phones, video projectors, iPods and portable DVD players—can all be re-envisioned as tools for ministering to those whose aging process has left them feeling disconnected from the Christian community and from God.

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men [and women] shall dream dreams

(Joel 2:28, *NRSV*)

The technological age offers many distractions that can keep us from attending to God. The tools of our era all too often make us worried or frantic, but this need not be the case. As *homo faber*—tool makers—at our best we use tools to glorify God and express our divine image. Modern tools can be a vehicle whereby the Spirit of God helps us “dream dreams.”

As we lose pieces of ourselves—physically and mentally—in the aging process, it is easy to forget that the Spirit has dreams for us. Spiritual caregivers help the weak remember what God has done and will do in their lives. As we speak to the weak using modern tools, old memories are stimulated. These mix with new sights and sounds. In a holy miracle from God, old men and old women once more dream the dreams God’s Spirit has for them.