

Originally published Nov. 17, 2005

Sunshine without joy

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Reader comments: "As I continue to watch both parents disintegrating slowly due to Alzheimer's, this column aptly described a caregiver's feelings which waiver between duty and futility," said Michele Ullery of Grosse Pointe.

The hotel clerk flashes a cheery Florida smile and asks, "You here on vacation?"

I wait for my husband to answer. He waits for me.

Instead, we answer the guy's friendly question with stony silence.

Finally I say, "Not vacation, no." Then I feel compelled to add, stammering, "But not business, either. And not really pleasure."

If we were here for pleasure, we would walk the beach, or at least linger in the hotel hot tub.

No, there's no word for what we're doing in Florida except, I suppose, tending.

Keen mind, upbeat spirit

My mother-in-law is almost 92, with a slow cancer, a keen mind and an upbeat spirit. She lives in a lovely assisted-living facility, with attentive staff, but they do not refill her supply of mini-bags of microwave popcorn. They do not reset her answering machine. They do not buy her bras.

We do those things. We take her shopping at Publix, where she inches down the aisles, holding tight to the cart, choosing soups and cheese and Kleenex.

We clean out her cupboards and fridge of stuff that's old or dead. This time, I help her prune clothing, too, getting rid of the suits and silky blouses someone else can now use. I buy her a few new things from Penney's, struggling to match her tastes, so she can stay in the game.

Because she can't reach the top shelves of her cupboards anymore, we race to three or four stores to find a storage rack for her closet. We buy a screwdriver. My husband manages to mount the thing, and I fill it up with soup cans and tiny cereal boxes.

We ask about confusing bills we get in the mail from her doctor. We press for details of her health that she doesn't relinquish in her daily phone chats with her son.

She is grateful and sweet. We laugh a lot. We tease each other. Each evening we ease her into the car, load her walker into the trunk and take her out to dinner where she orders a beloved Bloody Mary. Afterward, in her room, we break open the Bailey's we bought for her and, at 8 p.m., enjoy what she calls a nightcap.

The air is thick with death

But the visit is hardly rejuvenating.

Ambulances are everywhere, including at the front door to her place. Later, a new photo appears on the front desk in a well-used case inscribed "In Loving Memory." She can count eight others gone in the past year.

"I'm ready to go, too," she tells us. "I've had a good life." She relates what she wants in the end: a simple gathering of family at our place, and her ashes planted with her husband's in our garden.

People grow old everywhere. But in Florida, the air is thick with death. Memorial gardens are more common than day care centers. A storefront advertises "Cremation \$895, Funerals \$995." The Salvation Army store is huge, packed with the furniture and clothing of the dead.

Tending to an elderly mother in Florida forces your imagination to places it doesn't like to go.

As much as you love her, and hate to admit it, it feels good to get on a plane again and fly away home.