

The OWLS Discussion Group at Pennswood Village

by Brad Sheeks

In 2024, in an essay, “Turning eighty-seven,” for Pennswood Village’s *Village Voices*, I wrote about giving up driving. It was the first time I had to face some facts about dementia. On occasion, I’ve had to return something I’ve impulsively purchased. I’ve learned to consult with my wife before buying things. Speaking of Pat McBee, it fell to her to make the final decisions when we changed financial advisors and health insurers. I’m not able, sometimes, to visualize how to get from point “A” to point “B” several miles away, even though I’ve been driving that route for several years. What’s going on? Is this normal aging or something else? Dementia?

Researchers report that dementia is a medical condition involving cognitive decline that disrupts daily life. In contrast, old age involves mild, normal changes like slower processing speed or occasional forgetfulness. It is almost universally true that we seniors have moments when we can’t retrieve the name of a familiar person or place.

Last year I wanted to talk about what was happening to me. So, on impulse, I announced a planning meeting of residents who might be interested in a discussion group on the topic of living with dementia. The response was positive enough to encourage me to continue. We were averaging about a half-dozen participants with free-flowing back-and-forth discussions. I would prepare a one-page introduction of a topic with two or three discussion prompts in the form of questions. We told stories about being forgetful, about difficulty retrieving the right word in conversation, about moments of confusion, such as “Where am I and why am I here?” We had funny stories about such things as getting lost and painful stories about such things as giving up driving our cars. We adopted the confidence motto, “What happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas.”

As attendance continued to grow, I realized that focusing on “Living with Dementia” was too narrow, and I expanded the topic to include “Living with Dementia and Other Health Challenges.” Then, several months in, we realized that the topics had to be expanded to be more inclusive. We had a couple of brainstorming sessions and came up with OWLS (Older, Wiser, Luckier, Seniors) as the name of our group. Currently, we average about fifteen people at the Tuesday afternoon meetings and about 5 people who meet on Tuesday evenings via Zoom.

The topics focus on the physical challenges of the aging process and include metaphysical topics such as the journey of the soul. After reading the prompt sheet, I turn to the person on my right side and invite her or him to respond to the prompt questions for about three minutes. My role is to model attentive listening, without comments or questions. When the first person has finished sharing, the person on his or her right side has a turn to either talk or pass. This takes about 45 minutes, leaving time for back-and-forth discussions, usually in response to something said, since one person’s story can prompt someone else’s story. My modeling of

attentive listening without commenting or questioning became the norm for the group. Participants frequently comment that our OWLS discussion groups are valued simply because it is a time when people can talk about their lives and hear each other's stories in a safe social setting.

I first learned about attentive listening in a small-group format from the teachings of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator known for his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This format is known among Quakers as "Worship Sharing." Because the model does not require special training or knowledge, it can easily be replicated in other settings with other peer groups, but with one important caveat!! The facilitator must refrain from making any comment or question as the sharing proceeds around the circle. Easier said than done.