

The Upside of Forgetfulness

“I’m seriously thinking of putting you in a home. I’m a nurse, and I could do it.”

LuAnn spoke these endearing words to me last week after another apparent instance of me forgetting to do something she had asked me to do. Fortunately, I’m pretty sure she can’t legally commit me. Yet.

What she may not understand is that nurturing a pattern of forgetfulness can get one out of doing a lot of errands and household tasks, at least temporarily. Since I “forgot” she wanted me to prune the variegated viburnum hedge last Sunday, I was able to take that afternoon off and only later did I have to endure relatively brief verbal abuse accompanied by threats of involuntary institutionalization.

Disclaimer: In this age of increasing Alzheimer’s and other dementia, forgetfulness is somewhat less of a joking matter. I’m pretty sure we’re talking about the vagaries of normal aging here.

I’ve normally aged myself almost to 60 and so far have not accidentally left the gas stove burning or put the cat in the refrigerator. I prefer to believe that I have retained a large percentage of my higher cognitive functions although I’m pretty sure my multitasking days are over. As if I was ever able to do that.

I was reading an article recently which said that nobody is capable of true multitasking anyway. We are all doing what is called “paying continuous partial attention.” Some of us are just more adept than others at switching back and forth between alternate tasks really quickly. Not that it’s a valuable skill; several studies show that multitasking can be 20 to 40 percent less efficient than performing the same tasks sequentially.

I pretty much focus on one thing until it’s done for a different reason; any time I get interrupted and go off in another direction, there’s no guarantee I’ll get back to whatever I was doing before. This is pretty much the human version of the

canine “SQUIRREL!” scenario, when something new catches your attention and every other thought leaves your head.

I recently was standing barefoot in our living room and remembered I needed to bring the laundry up from the dryer in our unfinished basement. I took two steps in that direction before I realized I’d first need to put on a pair of shoes, so I turned around and took a couple steps toward the front hallway.

Next, I remembered I had left my shoes by the back door instead, so I turned around once more just as I recalled I was going to need the laundry basket from the upstairs bedroom (where LuAnn doesn’t allow shoes) so I reversed course once more to go upstairs, hoping that none of our neighbors were watching my disjointed dance through the window.

Before I could get upstairs, the phone rang. SQUIRREL! I think the laundry may still be in the basement.

Back to LuAnn, she has a tendency to stand at the sink in the kitchen and hold entirely one-sided conversations with me, sometimes while I’m in the bathroom with the door half shut and the water running while I’m vibrating my brain with the electric toothbrush in my mouth. Later she’ll say, “Why didn’t you do such-and-such like I asked you to?” I’ll ask, “Was I in the same room during this conversation?” Nevertheless, in her mind she told me, and I forgot.

I’m probably not as forgetful as she thinks I am, yet worse than I think I am. Either way, it’s all downhill from here. On the upside, I’m looking forward to avoiding a lot more chores (intentionally or otherwise) in the future.

Writer’s Group member Dave Parsons usually remembers to go to work every weekday at the business he co-owns on the Coralville Strip.