



## The Ross Retort

by Lisa Ross



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### ALZHEIMERS DISEASE: AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PLAGUE

Two great communicators died Saturday, Ronald Reagan and my mother, Betty Ross. Their physical lives ended long after their brains gave up the ghost.

Mom was a liberal Democrat when liberal was not a four letter word. So the fact that she and the conservative Republican icon are irrevocably tied together in memory would blow her mind.

Betty was one of those steadfast supporters of Adlai Stevenson until a fateful evening when she met a young Senator from Massachusetts while on volunteer typing duty at the local Democratic Party office. She had been to Camelot. So went the family.

Yet, the Reagan's have turned up in my life with far more frequency than our differing social circumstances would suggest.

I realized this strange confluence on our way to my mother's funeral in Los Angeles when we found ourselves driving just ahead of the Reagan entourage which was winding its way up I-405 to the Reagan Library.

My first real job as a high school student had me hosting Nancy Reagan, then the Governor's wife, at a charity luncheon for visually impaired girls.

The woman who today is a bravely intense and powerful advocate for stem cell research because of its promise of a cure for Alzheimer's is very different from the patrician but shy woman I spent time with 36 years ago.

A few years later, my college classmate Patti Reagan, now also a political writer using the last name Davis, shared some post-adolescent identity angst that shall go unreported here while she pierced my ears.

Now, we share the experience of having watched someone we love disappear. Alzheimer's Disease is a thief. Alzheimer's Disease transforms all its victims which includes everyone within reach—it can unite families as it did the Reagan's, or to tear them apart, as it did mine.

My mother left behind dramatic works of art—deep, full bodied abstract paintings and sculptures influenced by Henry Moore.

Ronald Reagan commanded Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. And son-of-a-gun, the German people eventually did tear down the Cold War's most powerful symbol of oppression, ending a terrible era.

Although their stature and impact on the world were certainly on different planes, both left behind legacies that transcended their lives.

I likely will never know at what moment the Reagan's realized the creative person they loved left the scene. I knew when a persistently patient activities director proudly showed me a drawing my artist mother just completed—a random grouping of stick people.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, 4.5 million Americans are afflicted with this dreadful disease. With the baby boomers aging, they say the number will increase exponentially over the next twenty years with catastrophic consequences for an overwhelmed health care system and for the next generation of caretakers.

The disease causes a gradual loss of memory and thinking skills over time until even basic tasks of life become impossible. Some fortunate victims lose their cognition of time and space before their dignity gives in to diapers and hand feeding.

For people of great means or those with the good sense to carry long-term health care insurance, the consequences are tempered by the ability to get professional assistance for the worst of it which can cost \$75,000 a year. Most of the expenses for Alzheimer's are not covered by conventional insurance or Medicare.

Without a cure or some sort of prevention, the Alzheimer's Association predicts that by mid-century 14 million ordinary Americans will have the awful distinction of experiencing their last years with corroding cognition, as did statesmen like Winston Churchill, poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, writers like Iris Murdoch and artists like Norman Rockwell.

Both Ronald Reagan and my mom, though following different paths, made people in their presence feel good. At the end they were robbed of their greatest ability, their talent to communicate.

Alzheimer's is an equal opportunity plague.