

“Still Alice”: Holding on to Who We Are

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When we were younger and just beginning to study Principle concepts concerning the purpose of life and about the nature of our lives as children of God, many of us tended to think in simple, basic terms.

In terms of our life journey, we often taught that we were conceived and nurtured for nine months in our mother's womb as our first stage of existence. Our life continued as we burst on the scene and embarked on a journey through this earthly existence for our second stage of life, hopefully looking forward to a long and healthy life. Ultimately, we would pass into

our eternal home to live with God and rejoin our loved ones who had gone on before us. We learned in those early days that in the grand scheme of things, our physical life would be but a passing moment, as it were, when compared to our eternal life. Yet how we lived in this second stage of life, how well we loved and how well we lived according to God's life-giving words were of prime importance. Most of the content though was fairly theological and did not deal with the practical dimension of our daily life.



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I don't know about you, but for me, I did not give much thought to the numerous physical challenges that might make our life on earth difficult. I was too busy going about the work of God to think too long or hard about such things other than to perhaps feel that somehow we might be shielded from some of these challenges because of the importance of the work we were doing.

However, I was reminded of this overly simple view of life while watching the sobering and powerful film "Still Alice." Julianne Moore, in an Oscar-winning performance, masterfully portrays Alice Howland, a linguistics professor at Columbia University and sought after guest lecturer, who, just after celebrating her 50th birthday, is diagnosed with a rare form of Alzheimer's disease that manifests at an early age. An intelligent and active woman, and mother of three adult children, this diagnosis cuts to the quick. Here is a woman whose life is defined by words, language and a life of the mind now rapidly being deprived of her thoughts and ideas as well as her memories.

Her battle with Alzheimer's is made all the more challenging when she learns that not only is it genetic but because of her highly developed intellect, the disease will rob her of her abilities at a far faster rate than other forms of the disease. On top of that, after her children have been tested, results show that her oldest daughter, who is expecting twins, has the gene as well.

We watch as she struggles each day to remember her children's birthdays, to hold a conversation with her husband, John (Alec Baldwin), to go jogging without feeling lost, or to simply read a book. Alice tries to be proactive by preparing for the day when she cannot function. She visits a residential facility for Alzheimer's patients who can no longer take care of themselves. Frightened by what she sees, Alice, ever the well-organized professor, records a video message to herself on her laptop with clear instructions on how to end her life on her terms when she feels she has reached that stage in which she can no longer function. Of course, at this early stage, she does not take into consideration the probability that she will not be able to understand the message, let alone carry it out.

Though Alice's story is told from her perspective, we are given a small glimpse of how her husband and children receive the diagnosis and attempt to deal with it. Initially, her husband, a respected academic as well, is in denial and just cannot believe the diagnosis because of her age. Even when John comes to terms with it, he really does not know what to do about it, though he tries hard to support his wife – maybe a bit too hard. Her children want to help but are not sure what they can honestly do to help. Ultimately, it is her youngest child with whom Alice has not always seen eye-to-eye on life issues, who returns home to help her father look after her mother. It becomes clear though that beyond making sure she does not wander off or does not harm herself, there is not much that the family can do other than love her while watching the mother and wife they knew fade away each day.

There is a point in the film, finally, in which Alice seems to come to terms with the disease but also makes it clear to those around her that she should not be discounted yet. She is asked to give a talk at an Alzheimer's conference. A telling moment in her speech is when she reminds the audience that while she may not be able to remember who she is, who her family is and most of the concepts and images that defined her in the past, she is "still Alice." She is not dead. Her body has not been taken over by some other life force. She has not gone away somewhere. She is and always will be Alice. She exists; she is here. And while she may not have her memories or remember those things that helped define her, Alice is still there – just in a different way.

Throughout the film I kept wondering how I would respond to the possibility of a life so totally redefined. Like Alice, my life as an educator is defined by the world of intellect, ideas and language. Would I have the courage to face a life devoid of these things? Would I be able to connect to those things that give my life meaning such as God, family and friends? Reading? Teaching my students? Sharing with students over a meal? Playing the piano? Such experiences have brought me joy and helped shape me. How and where would I find the joy? If I had a profound experience with God, would I be able to recognize it as such? Would I even be able to "feel" God? Would I feel the loss of such things?

This is what brought me back to the Principle. How does Alzheimer's fit into our understanding of Principle and God? The more I reflect on this, the more I have concluded that if our loving God has been so anxious to connect with us and to stay connected with us for eternity, surely there must be some way in which even in the midst of the fog and mindlessness of Alzheimer's, we can remain in communion with our Heavenly Parents.

"Still Alice" certainly served to shake me out of my comfort zone and remind me that life is not just a straightforward trajectory toward a blissful eternal future. It reminded me that there are things in life we cannot control and that we have to deal with such challenges as best we can. From the moment I walked out of the theatre, two thoughts have nagged at me the most. First, how does someone cope with Alzheimer's who lives alone, or does not have a supportive, loving family or community around them to help them deal with such personal crises? As hard as it was for Alice and her family to face such devastating news and to deal with it, at the end of the day, she was surrounded by her family who stepped forward and continued to love and support her. They did not abandon her.

The second thought was the classic point that we are not "given tomorrow" as the song goes. In one moment, Alice is in a restaurant toasting her 50th birthday, and the next moment, she is struggling to remember who she is. This thought was a sobering reminder about missed opportunities and about the amount of time that is often wasted daily, weekly and monthly.

The deeply personal and relevant nature of this film challenges all of us to re-evaluate how we view our life, the purpose of our life and how we live it. I know it challenged me. The film has also led me once again to my favorite area of research – neuroscience. Knowing that throughout our life our neural pathways are being shaped and reshaped with the help of our experiences, with what we learn and the diverse chemicals coursing through our brain, there must be something there to provide insight into this challenge. Maybe there is a light at the end of this scary tunnel after all. I will certainly be reflecting on this – while I still can.

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"Still Alice," rated PG-13, is still in some theaters and will be released on DVD and Blu-ray on May 12. Written and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, based on the novel by Lisa Genova; produced by Lex Lutzus, James Brown and Pamela Koffler; released by Sony Pictures Classics. Running time: 99 minutes. Cast: Julianne Moore (Alice), Kristen Stewart (Lydia), Kate Bosworth (Anna), Alec Baldwin (John), and Hunter Parrish (Tom).

Photo at top: *Julianne Moore in a scene from "Still Alice" (courtesy Sony Pictures Classics)*