

The gift of our selves

As I daily visit my friend with dementia, I obviously get to know some of the other residents at the assisted living facility. Allow me to share a few thoughts about Sigrid.

Sigrid was born in Nuremberg, Germany, just before World War II. As a little girl she remembers the huge rallies that Hitler staged. As I later learned from a PBS special, Hitler used Nuremberg because it had one of the largest plazas, one that would hold throngs of people. Hitler would use these rallies for propaganda films.

When the war started, Sigrid remembers the daily bombing of Germany by the Allies. The British bombed by night. The Americans bombed by day.

Sigrid remembered the Nuremberg trials, when many of Hitler's associates were convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Hitler avoided the trials by committing suicide.

Despite this traumatic start to her life, Sigrid persevered. She studied music, and became an opera star. When there were evenings of entertainment at the retirement facility, Sigrid would often sing softly in the background. I could hear a whisper of the voice that once thrilled audiences.

At night, Sigrid would walk past my friend's apartment. We always left the door open. I would chat with Sigrid for just a minute or two every evening. Invariably she would thank me for being there. "I feel safe when you are here," she would say.

Sigrid died recently. Her voice now joins the choirs of angels in heaven.

I tell her story, however, because I know that many people find it difficult to visit people in retirement facilities. "What would I say?" "She doesn't always know who I am."

The questions and doubts often go on and on. But I would encourage you to visit friends and relatives. Visit as a volunteer. It's not important what you say. It's only important that you are there, that you listen, that you care.

On any given day, we may not remember all the things that Jesus said and did. But we do know that God came to be with us. That's what really matters.

I remember another elderly lady. She would be visited at Christmas by family, bringing her all kinds of presents. She would say to them, very simply: "It's your presence, not your presents, that matters to me." It's the gift of ourselves that really matters. That's why God gave himself to us. He couldn't think of anything better to give.