

## Christine's Story

Told to and transcribed by Ingrid Rogers at Menlo Commons  
in the fall of 2021 as part of a Practicum on "Aging Well"

Parkinson's disease has deeply affected my life. I didn't use to feel old. One sign of age is that you can't move as much. I used to be active in lots of things. Now I can no longer ride a bike. I can still swim, but not to the extent that I did before. I was diagnosed two and a half years ago, at age 79. I was in such pain, especially in my back, and I was also suffering from restless leg syndrome. I felt there was nothing I could do about it, and it hurt terribly. When I first went to the doctors, nobody caught that I had Parkinsons. I also noticed that my balance was not what it used to be. When I finally figured out that I could take Parkinson's medication and that stopped the pain, it was just, oh, how wonderful! Before my diagnosis the only thing I knew was that people's hands were shaking--nothing else. Then I learned more. I don't really like to read about Parkinsons being a progressing degenerative disease though. I don't want to hear that. I want to learn that I can do something that helps me get well. But so far they haven't come up with anything.

I do some exercises that help, and I try to move my body. I have a hard time sitting still for a long time. So I go for walks with my husband Dag, and we swim in the pool and do exercises in front of the TV. It takes me forever to read a book because I can't sit still for so long. Also my memory is not as good. They say you should play games to practice the mind. But Dag doesn't really like to play cards. He finds that boring. Sometimes I ask our grandchildren to come over once a week or every other week, but you know, they're so busy. It's not that they don't want to do it, but they have all these activities after school.

Some of the results of Parkinsons are not that different from the results of aging in general, like the fact that I can't do what I used to be able to do. I love to cook, but now, after half an hour of standing in the kitchen, I get very tired. I miss the energy that I used to have. I used to love playing tennis, but I haven't done that in years.

There are also many things that make me happy though. Being able to live in this place at Menlo Commons is fantastic. I feel very fortunate to be close to our children and grandchildren too.

I am not afraid of dying. We have talked to the kids quite a bit about what we want. I believe that when I die, I die and that's it. My parents died almost 20 years ago and my father had decided in great detail what everybody should do and what they should inherit. He even planned his own funeral. I thought at the time that it was a bit crazy, but when he died it was helpful to know exactly what to do.

What I think is more important than thinking about funeral arrangements is to live in such a way that people remember you to be a positive and good and fun person to be with. I notice how much we in our family talk about my mother and Dag's. We want to be remembered like that. We want people to think that we were generous and giving--that I was a pleasant and kind person.

We enjoy knowing our neighbors. During the pandemic, of course, we couldn't see each other for a long time. Before that, we had people over for coffee. Now, when I think about getting together for dinner to celebrate that the pandemic is over, I feel too tired to cook. It's easier just to sit on our balcony or in the gazebo outdoors to visit.

We don't go to church. When we were growing up in Sweden, the Christian religion was taught in school. I was baptized Lutheran, and I was confirmed. I know pretty much what the Bible says, and I think it's good; but unfortunately I have been around people who go to church on Sundays then they don't follow the teachings the rest of the week. Living out the story and living a faithful life is helpful, quite aside from whether you go to church or not. And I don't mind people going to church or have a confessional religion--that's fine if that makes their life happy and if that works for them. Being generous and helping other people, that's part of loving your neighbor. I did grow up that way and pick up those values. I tried to teach these values to my children: This is what to do, and this is what you don't do. I mean they had to just absorb it by living in my house. They understood that and are living that out now themselves.

You asked whether there is something that I regret, that I wish I could have done differently. Well, I wish I could undo some small incidents or things I said. I didn't go back and say I'm sorry, that was not what I meant. Now I know that it's best to ask for forgiveness right away. When I was in my teens, my younger sister and I fought and fought and fought. After I did something to mean to her, I just could not ask for forgiveness; that was absolutely impossible for me. I should have though.

When we talk about it now, we are disgusted. It's like we grew up in totally different households. I experienced her as the one that our parents loved more. She had beautiful hair with red highlights, and everybody loved her and nobody thought that I was anything like that. From her viewpoint, she thought that I got all the goodies and new clothes while she just got the hand-me-downs. She felt that she always got the bad part in life. As for me, I complained because she didn't have to make her bed, she didn't have to do the dishes or help with chores. One time my father asked us to pull weeds in the garden. I did what I was told, and she didn't, but even so, she didn't get punished--which I thought was very unfair.

Now, over the years, we've talked about it. A sort of competition remained, even after I moved to the US with Dag and she stayed back in Sweden. Our children are more or

less the same age, and when we come home to visit in Sweden, some of that competition still continues. We are not as open about it as we should be.

The Second World War impacted our childhood. I was born in 1940 and my sister in 42, and of course we didn't have as much as children do these days. We got maybe one new coat per year, or one dress. When my two brothers were born in 1958 and 59, life had changed a lot. It was a different world because there was plenty of everything. I didn't have that kind of abundance growing up. But it's not that I missed anything. My parents loved me, I had a room that I shared with my sister and a roof over my head, we had plenty to eat, and we got what we needed even if it wasn't fancy. We got skates and skis and even a watch as birthday presents or for Christmas. I definitely felt that I was better off than a lot of my peers.

My husband and I have had a happy 56 years of married life together. Now we have children and grandchildren close by, and that's great. Growing up in Sweden and moving to the States has been formative for us. It was important to us to be exposed to different cultures. We appreciate the customs at home in Sweden but also celebrate whatever America has to offer. Being multicultural teaches you to be tolerant and open: celebrating new customs and accepting people who have different ideas or new ways of doing things--and maybe not being quite so quick to judge. It gives me satisfaction to see that our grandchildren, of their own free will, are keeping some of those traditions up. For instance, like in Sweden, we celebrate Christmas Eve more than Christmas Day. And there is always a big Midsummer celebration in Sweden, so they grew up with that tradition too. There is a special place near here where lots of Swedes come together on June 21, but when that couldn't happen last year, the kids took the initiative to plan it all by themselves. That warms my heart.