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Being sick allows one to enjoy love of family and friends and professional care

By Diether Haenicke
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At the end of last year I was very ill. Lying for days in the sick bed makes the mind wander, and many times my memories drifted back to the early days in my life when being ill was a relatively pleasant affair.

I grew up in a very large family with seven siblings, and being ill meant attracting the undivided attention of my parents. That meant a lot. I must say, that I was never seriously ill as a child, and being declared sick in my family was not easy.

My father, who, in my memory, never ever saw a doctor, was convinced that all illnesses, except perhaps measles and broken bones, could be overcome by sheer willpower. He kept a thermometer in his desk, and his study was the first station at which a prospective patient was diagnosed. The thermometer was lodged in the armpit and, absent an alarming temperature, we children were sent back to school and our assigned chores.

However, if an elevated temperature was detected, we were relegated to my mother's care. A warm and softhearted woman, she would take total control and pamper us back to good health. I was allowed to stay in my room, and my mother would bring special foods prepared just for me, including, of course, some of my favorite dishes. My mother sat at my bedside to keep me company during my meals, and I made every effort to look as weak and helpless as I could and not to let her notice my joy over the special treatment she generously provided.

My father, who was unable to demonstrate his love for his children through hugs, embraces or words, used to play the piano in the evening. Before he began, he would put his head in and say hello but leave the door open so that the sick child could hear him

better. For me he always chose pieces that he knew I loved particularly, mainly Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann, and while he played I felt that he loved me and worried about me just as my mother did in her own and different way.

Visits to the doctor were rare. Pediatricians did not want to see sick children in their waiting rooms. They saw patients in their offices in the morning and made house calls all afternoon in those cases where children could possibly infect others. Measles, chicken pox and scarlet fever often turned our home into a veritable hospital ward, since we children passed these on to each other, and the doctor came to visit more than one patient at a time.

Most of my friends considered not having to go to school the major benefit of being ill. I always loved going to school, but never would have admitted that to my friends, because it would have made me an un-cool nerd, and I wanted to be just like any other kid my age. My mother, though, knew it, and she found discreet ways to inform me about homework and reading assignments without giving my unsuitable idiosyncrasy away. In addition, she brought to my bedside oodles of books which I devoured one after the other, since I was an avid reader even then.

I did miss my friends, though. We played soccer every afternoon -- television, computers, video games and Wii had not yet relegated children indoors and made them captives of the electric outlet -- and that was our main social activity outside school. I remember that once, when I was ill with something contagious, my father put a ladder up outside my window so that my friends could climb up to the first floor and talk to me while I lay in bed on the other side of the room.

Being ill as a child and being ill as an adult are two very different experiences. It is strange to remember the little boy's sickbed as something pleasant and cozy. But even now in old age, it is comfortable to feel the love of family and friends and the care of competent professionals, all of whom are helping me get back on my feet.

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