We all have spiritual needs. We hunger for meaning in our lives and strive to build a relationship between ourselves and the cosmos. A person can have spiritual needs but not be associated with an organized religion or even profess a faith in God.

Ernest Becker, in his book *Escape from Evil*, defines spirituality as “an expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has life, has emerged on it and has worked, suffered and died.”

This desire to make a difference, to count, may serve as a source of strength and motivation for caregivers. It is not unusual to hear a caregiver say, “I may not be able to change the world, but I can affect what goes on in my little corner of it.”

For the person with dementia, the spiritual dimension of life changes with the progression of Alzheimer’s. The intellectual dimension of spirituality diminishes while the emotional aspect may become stronger.

Seeds of spirituality are sown in childhood. Long before they have words to describe feelings, children know what it is like to be loved or the loneliness of not having someone to care for them. These feelings are stored in the long-term memory and can be retrieved even in the late stages of dementia.

Many people with dementia are also able to respond to religious or spiritual symbols and rituals from their childhood. Old memories may be stirred up by participating in religious activities.

You can help the person tap into her spirituality, and you can tap into your own spirituality in these ways.

- Take a walk in the woods to appreciate nature’s wonders
- Listen to moving music or favorite religious hymns
- Read familiar Scripture passages or prayers
- Enjoy objects of beauty or religious significance

In addition to tapping into remembered faith, it is important that you try to be attentive to the issues of grief and loss that confront the person with dementia. The person might mourn her deceased parents as if they died yesterday, even though they died decades ago.

Acknowledge the person’s feelings of sadness and loss without correcting the factual data. Say, “I know you miss him.”

Everyone has a need to be heard. Listen to the concerns of the person with Alzheimer’s and provide opportunities for her to express her anger, even her anger at God.

Be patient and gentle with yourself and the person you care for as you both face the challenges ahead.