

# Senior Moments

**06-25-2004**

## **Mom and Dementia**

*by Ellie Kahn*



My mother sounded upset when she called the other day. "What's wrong, Ma?" I asked. "I don't know what's going on or where I am," she said. "Who are these people with me?"

I reminded Mom of her move to Los Angeles three years ago, and her life at a San Fernando Valley board and care.

She sighed and said, "Ellie, I'm losing my marbles."

The painful truth is she's right. Mom's dementia impacts so much in her life. Once an avid reader, she can't remember the plot of a book after the first page. Eventually, she stopped trying. Reading her short articles in the newspaper holds her attention for a while, but since she doesn't know what's going on in the world, most news means little to her. Mom and the other women in her residential care home occasionally watch CNN. It's hard to tell if any of them really know what's going on. Like my mother, their intelligence is intact, but for most, their short-term memory is gone.

Recently when I was there, we watched images from a terrible suicide bombing in northern Iraq. My mother was horrified. I reminded her about Bush and the war in Iraq and she made some disparaging comments about Bush's intelligence. Fifteen minutes later, my sister called from North Carolina. I leaned close to the phone at Mom's ear so I could listen. After the usual chatter about the weather, the dogs and my mother's digestion, my sister said, "Isn't what's happening in Iraq just horrible?"

Mom said, "It certainly is."

Then she covered the phone and whispered to me, "What happened in Iraq?"

She sounded concerned and looked anxious, like she should know. But any memory of what she'd just seen on the news was gone.

Though much of what's happening to my mother's mind is painful, there are moments of levity caused by her dementia. In fact, Mom is very often amused by her own forgetfulness. While her short-term memory is gone, her wonderful, slightly sick sense of humor is intact.

Last year, my mother and I went to my Uncle Bob's funeral. We were escorted to front-row seats at the graveside and after a moment, my mother looked at the casket and loudly said, "Who died?"

Heads around us turned. Mom looked at me, her embarrassment quickly shifting to amusement and she started to giggle. Then I started to giggle. I was reminded of Friday night services years ago, when my mother would start to sing, very off-key, and we'd both end up with tears rolling down our face from trying to swallow our laughter.

After Uncle Bob's funeral, Mom and I were sitting on the sofa at the reception, enjoying a sandwich and a little wine. Mom stopped chewing suddenly. "Where are we?" she asked me.

"At Aunt Carole and Uncle Bob's house," I responded.

She glanced around the room, then said, "Where's Bob?"

I almost choked. I looked at her and whispered, "We just buried him."

She looked completely confused for a brief moment, and then we both burst out laughing. We got a number of suspicious looks from people around the room who probably thought we'd had too much wine.

Then there was the morning after the Queen Mother died. My mom was living at her former board and care, and during breakfast another resident, Sally, was reading the newspaper. She suddenly said, "The Queen Mother died."

My mother looked up from her oatmeal and asked, "Really? How old was she?"

"Let me look," Sally said. "She was 102."

My mother responded, "Isn't that wonderful!" Moments passed. Then Sally, still reading the paper, said, "Oh my! The Queen Mother just."

My mother replied, "No kidding? How old was she?"

Sally read further, then said, "She was 102."

"Imagine. Isn't that amazing!" exclaimed my mother. This same conversation apparently repeated for 10 minutes, both women enjoying their exchange over and over again.

Maybe this is the upside of my mother's dementia. Each moment is totally new. In fact, for her, each moment is all there is. While most of us agonize over the future or analyze and regret the past, my mother — having lost track of the past and lacking the ability to imagine the future — lives wholly in the present.

*Ellie Kahn is a personal historian, journalist and documentary filmmaker. She can be reached at [ekzmail@gmail.com](mailto:ekzmail@gmail.com) and [www.livinglegaciesproductions.com](http://www.livinglegaciesproductions.com)*