

Senior Moments

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My New Mother

by Ellie Kahn



My mother has become a serene and content old woman.

The changes, probably due to both her dementia and medications, have created an unexpected-and quite wonderful new chapter in our relationship.

Maybe we would have gotten along well at this point in our lives — me at 55 and Mom at 86. But even through my 40s, Mom and I always had a bit of a “control thing” with each other during our visits. She would nag me about something — my hair (“Your hair is so bushy; why don’t you get it cut a little?”); my clothes (“Can’t you find something besides that old T-shirt to wear?”); my body temperature (“It’s freezing out here! Don’t you need a coat?”); or parenting style (“Are you sure you should let him do that?”); or how I spent my time (“You’re going out with your friends again? When am I going to see you?”). Somehow there was always a message of how I wasn’t pleasing her or I wasn’t ensuring that she’d feel loved. And I hate to admit how often I fell into the old defensive, get-off-my-back-I’m-an-adult response (even though I was reacting like a 15-year-old).

But now things are different. She’s pleasant. She’s loving. She is all-accepting. She doesn’t remember anything that used to bug her about me and my life and doesn’t seem to want to control anything about me. It’s hard to believe. This alters our dynamics dramatically.

My mother wasn’t a happy person for much of her life. She was always a loving mother, but she was often depressed and quite focused on herself and her problems. My sister and I spent a good part of our conversations and time trying to help Mom feel better.

Maybe it requires short-term memory to stay depressed. Maybe if you don’t remember negative thoughts about past regrets, or unfulfilled hopes, or imperfect children or spouses, you don’t feel unhappy. The obsessing and ruminating that once

caused my mother's misery aren't possible anymore. Even if she tried, she couldn't remember what she was depressed about.

So now that Mom isn't preoccupied with how terrible her life is, the side of her that's truly easy to love is what's most evident.

Although my mother has no short-term memory, she thankfully still knows who I am. She recognizes me when I walk into the room, and she knows me when it's my voice waking her from a nap.

"Ellie!" she says with excitement and surprise. "What are you doing here?"

She has lived within a few miles of my home for four years. But she doesn't realize she lives in Los Angeles and she thinks I've arrived from the other side of the country when I appear. She's always thrilled that I have come to visit. It's pretty wonderful to be able to make someone so happy just by my presence. And having heard the pain my friends have gone through when their parents stop recognizing them, I realize that I'm truly blessed that my mother still knows me.

There have certainly been some painful losses due to Mom's dementia. Unlike some people with the disease, she can't reminisce about the long-ago past. Her mind is like a DVD that's been erased.

Because of this, we've lost the shared pleasure of remembering certain events — like the famous ski trip when she drove home for 12 hours through a blizzard with five teenagers in the car. One of them had a broken ankle, another was giving himself insulin shots, while I, riding shotgun, shouted whenever Mom was driving off the road and sang Broadway musical numbers to keep her sane.

On that topic, in spite of major memory loss, Mom still remembers the words to many of the songs from "My Fair Lady," "Oklahoma" and "South Pacific," so she usually joins in if I break into song — "Some enchanted evening, you will meet a stranger..." It only startles the other residents slightly and gets Mom smiling, which makes it worth any embarrassment I feel over my inability to carry a tune.

In spite of having no short-term memory, my mother has retained her quick sense of humor as well as her social worker's ability to give good advice. I can talk to her about anything — although she does get a bit jealous when I talk about romance and sex. When I have told her about my Internet dating and e-mailing with prospective dates, she said, "Can't you find me a man?" Fortunately, she forgets the request, so I haven't had to find her a boyfriend who hopes to meet an elderly woman with dementia. Mom and I talk about my challenges of being a single parent and the pros and cons of certain men I meet. She is insightful, funny and compassionate in a really lovely way.

My mother is too frail to take shopping or out to lunch anymore, and her eyesight is so poor that she wouldn't be able to see my beautiful garden, which is sad because she always loved gardening. Our days of swimming, playing tennis and skiing together are far behind us, but I feel like I have been given a chance to really love

my mother in a way that didn't seem possible before. I'm so grateful for this time with her.

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