



Bob was an avid fly fisherman and loved fishing the streams of Oregon. I met Bob when he moved into our facility after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He had a wonderful relationship with his wife. I asked her to bring me one of Bob's fishing poles. We were all outside enjoying the sun when his wife opened the door with a fishing pole in her hand. I gave the pole to Bob and asked if he would show us how to cast. He tossed the line out with such ease and then handed me the fishing pole. Needless to say, I didn't do very well, but he enjoyed watching me try. Then I asked him, "How do you tie the lures on?" He grabbed into the air for a fishing line, which wasn't really there, and he moved his hands and fingers as if he were tying the knot. He looked over at me with the imaginary knot in his hand and a smile on his face. I said, "You're amazing." And he just laughed.

This is what I mean by "creating a moment of joy." He relived one of his own simple pleasures, fly fishing. A pastime he loved. If his wife didn't bring in his fishing pole, this moment would not have occurred. We would have missed our opportunity to create a moment of joy, but instead we captured it. We created a moment of joy for the people who were watching, a moment of joy for me, for his wife, and most importantly a moment of joy for him.

“I want to go home.”

Understand that the home they are looking may no longer exist because it is a home from long ago. Saying “I want to go home,” could also simply mean they need to get back to their room, or they are ready to go to heaven. Try and figure out what “home” means to them and there you will find your answers.

Possible responses:

“Do you live on a farm or in town?”

“Will you help me _____ before you go?”

“Your brother will pick you up at 10:00.” Then at 10:00, “Your brother will pick you up after lunch.” Give them the hope they can still go home and give them a reason to stay just a little bit longer. This works really well with people who have short-term memory loss.

“We are going to have coffee soon.”

“The doctor wants to make sure you are feeling 100 percent better, so he wants you to stay one more day.” In their generation the doctor was put on a pedestal, and was not usually questioned.

“But the church ladies have made roast beef and mash potatoes. Just stay for lunch.” This triggers three positive responses.

- 1) The food is good
- 2) The food is free
- 3) It would be rude if they didn't eat what the ladies worked so hard to make.

Give them a reason to stay just a little bit longer. Typically around 3:00 it's time to go home because in their truth they need to get home for dinner. You need to figure out who they are worried about. Then let them know that person knows where they are and give them a reason to stay just a little bit longer. For instance, “Bob called and wants you to stay for supper. We are having _____.” Then after supper, “Bob said it was too dark out, just stay for tonight. I have a room all ready for you.” If they need more reassurance you can add, “I called Bob and he said he will pick you up in the morning.” Using the person's name that they are worried about is better than saying “He” or “She” because they don't know who you are talking about when you use he or she.

Live Their Truth

Since a person with Alzheimer's has lost the last 20 to 60 years they are living in another time in their mind. No matter how hard we try we cannot bring back their short term memory. We can, however, take hold of their long term memory and use it to create moments of joy. This means we need to live their truth.

When she is looking for her mom your goal is to make it seem like her mom is perfectly OK at this moment. "Your mom is feeding the chickens." "Your mom is at church." By giving answers that make sense to them, they are able to relax and not worry about where their mom is. Under normal circumstances, it seems like you lying to her. But these are not normal circumstances. This is a disease. I reassure you it is not lying, but it is "living their truth." Would they ask, "Where's my mom?" If they knew she was no longer living? Would they ask about their cows if they knew they had already been sold? This person wouldn't ask such questions unless it was very real in their mind. They are doing the best they can with the abilities they have left. No matter how many times you correct them, do they change? No. So it is our responsibility to change the way we respond to them. We need to live in their truth so they can feel like everything is OK for the moment. When they FEEL OK, whose day gets better? Both people win!

Sally would wake up in the morning and want to water her horse. I would whisper (because it's our little secret), "I got up early and did it for you. You can sleep in this morning." Now we all know what happens to kids when they don't do their chores. If I had told Sally she no longer has a horse, she would worry about what happened to her horse. Hint: "I need to water the horse" could also mean they need to go to the bathroom.

Jack would wake up at 4:00 a.m. almost every morning and insist he had to go to work. He was a construction worker most of his life and until people "joined his journey" he would become combative because staff insisted he did not have to work anymore. They needed to give him a universal reason why he did not have to go to work. Now the answer is, "It's raining out. Too wet to work outside. May I make you some coffee?" Notice we didn't make him go back to bed because his "habit of a lifetime" was getting up at 4:00.

Simple Pleasures

Think back when you were a child and all the simple pleasures you found: watching ants build their house, lying under the stars, running out in the rain, licking a lollipop, eating ice cream, walking through tall grass, finding a new flower, searching for beautiful rocks. We all need to relive these simple pleasures again.

A simple pleasure for an older person might be those things, and it might be having their hair combed slowly, getting a back rub, getting lotion rubbed into their hands, having someone gently brush their teeth, eating with a friend -- the list is endless. Focus on simple pleasures, it's not spending hours organizing a big party, or buying the person a whole new wardrobe. It's all about fulfilling basic needs to the fullest. It's as simple as cleaning someone's glasses. You will be amazed by the gratitude you receive because now your loved one can see better. It's truly a gift, especially in the last stages of Alzheimer's, to understand the importance of simple pleasures.

I have a vision. A vision that we will soon look beyond the challenges of this disease, and focus more of our energy on creating moments of joy. We know that we cannot create a perfectly wonderful day for someone with Alzheimer's, but each and everyone of us can create a perfectly wonderful moment!

*“People will forget what you said,
People will forget what you did,
But the feeling you leave
them with will linger on.”*

Universal Reasons

Whatever age they are living we need to give them a reason why they don't have to do what they think they have to do. You need to find that answer that makes them FEEL like everything is OK for the moment. The answers you find will be different for every person.

Where are my children?

Answer: Your kids are in school. Your kids are taking a nap upstairs. They just fell asleep. Your kids are at _____ house.

I have to go to work.

Answer: It's a holiday. It's Saturday or Sunday. The boss called and said he wouldn't be in, so you are to take the day off.

Where is my mom?

Answer: Running errands, getting groceries, doing laundry, doing chores, over at _____ house, taking a nap.

Where is my husband?

Answer: At work, up town drinking coffee with the guys, out in the field, at the hardware store.

Another very difficult situation is when the person asks where their spouse is, and their spouse has already passed away. Again, we need live their reality. This person would not be asking where their spouse is, if he/she didn't think their spouse was alive. Right?!! Imagine if someone told you today that your spouse was dead. What grief and pain you would go through. Now imagine that you asked that question many times throughout the day. It would definitely affect a person's health, cause depression and decrease functioning ability. Who suffers the repercussions when the person with dementia is stressed and depressed? You do. Instead, think of what their spouse might be doing if they were alive. "Jo is at work." "Jo is out in the field plowing." "Alice is fine." Anytime you can fill in the names of people and what they would actually be doing during the day, your story is obviously more believable. If you don't know the answer to their question, then ask them, "Is your husband a farmer?" Make sure to ask a question that only requires them to answer with a yes or no. They may no longer be able to talk in sentences. Eventually you'll hit something right. When you find the answer that works....Tell everybody!!!

Powerful Tools That Create Positive Outcomes

Understand that a person with Alzheimer's will lose their short-term memory, but retain their long-term memory if we learn how to trigger it.

The first part of the brain that is damaged affects the short term memory. This is why they repeat their stories, why they cannot remember what they had for breakfast or that their son visited the night before. Instead of making them utilize their short term memory, focus on their long term memory. When you ask them what they had for breakfast they say, "I didn't have breakfast. Would you make me some?" Switch to their long term memory and ask what they like to eat for breakfast, cereal or eggs? Another classic situation is when you say, "I heard your son came to visit you last night." Their response goes like this, "What! Where was he? He didn't come see me." Again, switch to their long term memory and tell them how you met their son, Bob, the other day and that they must be a wonderful parent because he is such a gentleman.

During a discussion about pets, Tom piped up about his pet mule. He said, "I had a pet mule once named Topsyie. The only way to get Topsyie to work for me was to share my tobacco with him." I asked him how old he was and he said, "I was about 15 or 16." The positive aspect about Alzheimer's is that Tom was 82 years old and remembered such detail because our conversations triggered his long term memory. He not only remembered how old he was but also the name of his pet mule. That's amazing!! Imagine the memories that would flow every day if he had a blown up picture of him and his mule in his room.

People with dementia may not understand the words that come out of your mouth, but they know how you make them feel and they know what they see. So the more you use visual, touch, smell, hearing, the more likely you are to trigger memories.

*Our value lies in what we are and what we have been,
not in our ability to recite the recent past.
—Homer, a man with Alzheimer's*