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Alzheimer's: Sometimes Humor Helps

Correcting my mother's memory didn't help. So I decided to lighten up.

posted by [John Stark](#), May 13, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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Shortly after my mother received her diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, my parents sold their retirement house in the golden foothills of California and, to be nearer my brother, moved into an assisted living facility in San Jose. For Ruth and Clint, the place had a lot to offer: excellent meals, live concerts in the rec room and a professional staff that couldn't have been more sensitive. The front-desk receptionist's title was director of first impressions.

I was living in Boston, and one night I got a phone call from my

mother. Before my parents' move, her memory loss had been gradual and her behavior relatively normal. She could still play bridge and the piano. My family began to think that maybe she'd been falsely diagnosed, that she might get better.

Mom was crying. My father, she told me on the phone, was missing. "He went to the grocery store four days ago and hasn't come back," she said. "Have you seen him? Did he come to visit you? He wasn't wearing his sweater. I'm very worried."

I hung up and called the director of first impressions. She checked on my father, who was in my parents' apartment watching TV.

I called my mother back. "Mom, Dad's right there," I told her. "No he's not," she said. "Then who's there with you?" "My father," she told me. "Your grandfather, Wes."

My grandfather had died in 1969. So much for the idea that my mother was getting better.

From the day when he supposedly went to the Safeway and never came back, until he died a year later of natural causes, mentally sharp to the end, my father ceased to be present in my mother's mind. She had replaced him with the image of her father — which in a way makes sense. Ever since my mother's diagnosis, my father had looked after her like a parent.

As understanding as my father was about my mother's condition, there were times when he couldn't contain his frustration at the loss of his identity. Once, during one of my mother's phone calls to me — "Have you seen your father?" — he picked up the phone in the other room, yelled into the receiver, "I'm here, goddammit!" then hung up.

My mother's loss of memory proved frustrating for me, too. Although she never forgot who I was, she couldn't, as time went on, remember her close friends or cherished pets. I was constantly correcting her, filling in blanks, saying, "I already told you that" or "Remember?" But as her nurses

later explained to me, when you deal with someone who has dementia or Alzheimer's, you shouldn't try to refocus their reality. If you do, you only confuse them more, and may even bring them to tears.

One evening over dinner with my parents, I finally had to make a truce with my mother's disease. As we were reading the menus in the dining room, she called my father "Daddy." "Mom," I said, "that's not Grandpa. Look at his face." "Of course it is," she replied, giving me a look that suggested I had lost my marbles. I then tried to reason with her: "Mom, if your father were still alive, he'd be 120 years old, making him the oldest person in the world." "I know," she said, "and that's why he's getting his picture in the newspaper."

I was too astonished by the cognitive logic of her tangled brain cells to press my case. I knew at that moment that Alzheimer's had securely planted its flag of victory. And from that day on, I gave up trying to correct or reason with her. Why torment her any longer?

A weight had been lifted off me, too. As my mother's mind went deeper into the woods, I quit trying to interrupt the journey. Instead, I found beauty and humor in her descriptions of the landscape.

"You're going to have a little brother. I'm pregnant," she once said — at the age of 82, no less. I replied that I was thrilled, as I'd always wanted a little bro. One afternoon I took her to a matinee at the cineplex. Although we sat next to each other, I saw one film and she saw another. From her description, I liked her movie better. It starred Errol Flynn.

After my father died, my mother was wheeled down the hallway of the assisted living center and into the secured Memory Care unit, where she lived, never venturing out, for two more years. Although Ruth and Clint had been married for more than 60 years, and had run a small tool-making business together, which they started out of their garage, Mom never grieved over Dad's passing. Whenever I visited her or called her from Boston, she'd ask me, "Have you seen your father?"

On the advice of her caregivers, I would answer that question honestly and directly — "Mom, you forgot, but Dad died" — without pressing the point. Sometimes she'd say, "Oh," and other times nothing at all. Then I'd move on to the next subject: "Have you had your lunch today?"

There's no question that Alzheimer's is a tragic disease. Yet I believe that my mother, in those last two years of her life, was happy.

As someone who had lived most of her life on the verge of hysteria, she had finally found a tranquil pasture. Although she was undemanding, the Memory Care staff fussed over her constantly. Throughout my life she had admonished me for being "too trusting." But wherever cynicism lives in the brain, it wasn't there anymore. Maybe compassion had replaced it: "What can I get you? Do you need anything?" she was always asking Mary, her bedridden roommate.

For a woman who had trouble expressing affection to her kids, even as adults, my mother couldn't have been warmer. Every time I visited her, she would kiss me hello and good-bye and tell me she loved me — words I'd seldom heard when I was growing up. Her sky blue eyes never looked bluer.

Several months after my father died, an outdoor service was held for him at a veterans cemetery in the dusty San Joaquin Valley — as a 21-year-old sailor, he'd been at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked it in 1941. As my father's flag-draped urn was lowered into the ground, a bugler played taps. My brother, his wife, my two grown nieces and I all wept. But not Mom. Her expressionless face offered no clues as to what she was taking in.

Afterward, my family stopped for lunch at an Italian restaurant. I asked my mother what she thought of the memorial service. "Was Clint there?" she replied. "He went to the store without his sweater and hasn't come back. I'm very worried."