

Mary Chasen
1424 words

We Sang, We Flew

I work at a senior citizen residency. The mental health capacities of the residents vary vastly; some are still able to read novels while others are lost in worlds of their own. As an activity leader, it is my duty to entertain the residents and bring smiles to their faces. I love being around these sweet elderly souls and learning about their lives. There are a number of residents who have about a billion great stories to tell and no problem sharing them, while others have a harder time communicating their memories. I try to give a little extra time to the ones who seem to be alone most of the day. It's hard to watch these residents sit alone at dinner and have no one to talk to all day. After the first day of seeing this, I decided that I could not allow them to disappear because of something that was out of their control. I promised myself that I would get to know these disregarded elders, which proved to be more looked down upon than expected.

Two weeks into my job I was called into my boss' office. I knew from the look on her face that she was not happy with me. As I stepped into the office I tried to figure out what I had done wrong. She got right to the point. "You need to stop spending time with the senile residents. They won't remember who you are tomorrow. They won't even remember a conversation from five minutes ago." I asked if it was okay to spend just a little bit of time with them but she cut me off and reprimanded "Do not put your time into patients with Alzheimer's. Do I make myself clear?" My face flushed red and I felt extremely conflicted. Do I go against my own values and conform to a belief system that ignores the rights of the disadvantaged? Or do I stand by my conviction that no one should be denied the joy of human connection and risk getting fired? At first I really tried to be a good employee and I stopped myself from interacting with the

“forbidden” residents. One resident in particular, Salvatore, made this very difficult. I watched Sal wander the halls of the one story building, getting increasingly agitated as he was ignored when asking “How do I get upstairs to my wife and kids? They are on the second floor of the house and I cannot find the stairs.” I felt a strong sense of empathy for his confusion and I could not help but respond to his question. “There’s no second floor Sal.” He nodded his head and five minutes later he asked the same question. And five minutes later I answered as I walked him back to his room. In that moment I decided to let my boss’ words become my challenge. Maybe the residents with dementia will not remember who I am tomorrow but I will remember how I treated them today. I set off on a mission to make every resident feel like he or she mattered. Because to me they all did.

My quest began. I snuck into Salvatore's room one day to chat with him. He was very unaware of who I was or what was going on around him as per usual. I knew Salvatore was Italian, for he had a thick accent. I'm Italian and I study the language in school, so I tried speaking to him in Italian. I asked him if he had seen one of my all time favorite movies “La Vita Bella”. His only response was “I don't know”. I asked him again expecting the same confused response, however this time he broke out into a song. The main lyrics of the song were “La Vita Bella”, so maybe he thought I was talking about a song. I was in awe of this feeble man’s booming voice. I cheered and clapped for him when he finished, and this was the first time I saw Sal smile. I then played every classic Italian song I could find on my phone, and sang along with him. Sal loved to sing! I did this with him each day, of course in secret so I would not get in trouble, and our favorite song became “Volare, Cantare”. This means “to fly, to sing”. Every time we finished that song I would tell him my name and remind him that he was my very good friend. Weeks passed and one day I got the courage to ask Sal if he knew my name. I knew in

reality it would be impossible since he did not even recognize his own children. I asked anyway. I approached Sal and tilted his chin so we could be eye to eye. I said "Sal do you know me?" He looked into my eyes. There was a pause. "You Mary right? And you my friend?" I truly thought I was hallucinating. My eyes filled with tears as I exclaimed "Yes Sal, I am Mary and I am your friend." That was one of the best moments of my life.

After my experience with Salvatore in the senior residency, I came to value the idea of helping other residents celebrate their memories and the stories of their lives, despite how unrealistic it could seem. One activity that often helped the residents to calm down and open up was coloring. I noticed the peaceful feeling that would fill the activities room when the residents were coloring and making art. As an artist, I know art and emotional consciousness go hand in hand. Because of the vibrancy I felt from the residents when they told their stories, the idea came to me to create a personalized coloring book for them. I took a specific memory from each one of them, and turned it into a page that they could color in. I sketched outlines of cultural icons they spoke of from their era, images from old song lyrics they enjoyed, and important historical events they lived through and felt connected to. I then copied each of the pages and compiled one collective coloring book for each of the residents incorporating all the sketches of the memories that they shared with me. Veteran Bob, who suffers from dementia, smiled at me as he colored the famous image of the soldier kissing the woman in Times Square at the end of World War II, and said, "That's me and Gayle!", referring to his wife. Rosemary started singing "music music music" as she colored the nickelodeon. Robert talked excitedly about Coney Island as he colored in the boardwalk while Tony fondly reminisced about his old home as he colored the New Rochelle city skyline. As we colored together, I started to realize that we are all

looking for connection in one way or another, and sometimes the simple act of listening to those who are disregarded because of age or ability can open a door that may have seemed locked.

I have developed a true appreciation for the value of listening with my heart through my experiences with people who suffer from Alzheimer's. I have come to understand that there is a need to pay attention to those who have no voice; those who are kept separate or are deemed useless by society. All people, regardless of mental capacity have a story to tell and a desire to be heard. It is impossible to release the locked memories without the key of connection. I remain inspired to watch out for the overlooked solutions that seem too easy and to create safe spaces where authentic communication is based in mutual respect, gratitude and sincere interest. Because of my experiences with Alzheimer's, I now know my life's work will be touched by a brushstroke of humility for I have come to understand the blessings of the ability to remember and capacity to interact. If we all took the time to radically listen, to hear the messages held in the eyes, I believe we would come to see that we are more alike than different.

In defying my boss' orders I discovered a world beyond the veil of dementia. Just because one door closes in the mind does not mean another is not waiting to be opened. When Sal started singing in his native language I saw the sparkle in his eyes and I knew I had to follow him. Not only did we sing, but we also flew.