

Communicating Beyond Alzheimer's Fog

Alzheimer's cloaks whole families in a slow procession of grief as we try to help someone through a disjointed journey from one life to the next. As that parent, spouse or friend moves further into the gray fog, we search for ways to communicate with the bewildered, lost traveler. Here's a way to be with them, to talk with their Being through the difficult passage...and beyond.

"My mother is excellent!" I remember writing that below my crayoned attempt at drawing in first grade. I'd just learned how to spell "excellent," so I obviously had to use it. In my drawing, Mom had a green gown on and a whole lot of great red hair. I think I gave her a crown as well! She deserved it.



Florence (1919–2011)

I got my red hair from her—only two of her eight children did. I also got her musical talent. All eight of us got that to a pretty good degree. Many of us also got her brains. Some got her sturdy perseverance and resolve.

At fifteen, Mom graduated from a tiny girls' Catholic high school in New York City and was headed to Hunter College. One of the nuns at Mount Saint Ursula shook her head in dismay. "Florence, you're so young and it's such a big school! I'm afraid you'll get lost there." My mother decided that was not about to happen.

First day at Hunter, she saw a poster announcing elections for freshman class officers. To run, all you had to do was give a speech. So she did. And at fifteen, she was elected President of the freshman class.

She not only graduated from Hunter, she went on to earn a Master's degree in Voice from the Manhattan School of Music when she was 21. Not many women graduated from college back then, let alone got a graduate degree. Along the way, Paramount Pictures had offered her a five-year contract, but she turned it down. "I wanted something I could depend on." After all, her father had died when she was 11—at the nadir of the Great Depression. Her mother got a job teaching music in the New York public schools, and there was neither the time nor the money to explore long shots. Instead, she pushed through her education as quickly as she could and got a job teaching the children of the officers on the West Point Military Academy base. And she'd met a young medical student at Yale who was as smart, steady and reliable as she. They had 65 years together as husband and wife, and as best friends.

Mom was 86 when Dad died. At his wake, she insisted on standing the whole four hours while she spoke with each of the roughly 200 people who were there—all of their friends, his colleagues, and the many medical students he had trained throughout his long career as a pioneer in anesthesiology.

During her last few years, she drifted into that gray fog of Alzheimer's. I learned a sweet little piano piece to talk to her Being then—and ever since. It's called "[Träumerei](#)" (Dreaming) by Robert Schumann from his *Kinderszenen*, (Scenes from Childhood). In the piece, a child is dreaming. There is a troubled patch—a bad dream, perhaps—and then something, someone, reaches out to the dreaming child to soothe them, comfort them, and kiss their forehead as the child returns to a peaceful sleep.

When I first learned this, I would imagine I was contacting my mother's Being—a child in some other world even though she was physically still here in this world. We would just smile and be with each other. When the troubled music appears—when the worries and terrors surfaced from being split between two worlds—I would imagine being the parent for her, comforting the child who had already started its next journey and the grand mother, Florence, who had yet to depart this one.

For anyone with parents who had or have Alzheimer's and other late-life dementias, perhaps this lovely piece and this sketch of an imagination journey may help you contact them.

***Träumerei*, Robert Schumann**, performed by Martha Argerich, Deutsche Grammophon (1984)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OippNH2IREU>