

Deep Listening

The Language of Silence

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It is a sunny March day full of the promise the lamb would soon follow in the footsteps of the lion. My thoughts drift to garden planning as I step into the lobby of The Mary Wade Home. Walking down the short hallway to the elevator I am overcome by the stale odor, not unclean, but like that of a house that has been sealed up tight for many months. My eyes water with disappointment. As a younger woman, I had not expected so many hours of each week would be spent in a nursing home visiting my elderly mother. She has been wheelchair bound for some time but it was the dementia that necessitated the move from assisted living to nursing home.

She remembers me, the two-family house on Utica Ave in Brooklyn where she lived as a small child, and the name of her red-headed fifth grade teacher. She doesn't remember if she had lunch today, the foot tapping performance by Mojo less than a half hour ago, or, at times, the name of the man she was married to for 56 years.

This absence of memories of so many things in the distant past and almost everything in the near present, is for certain a loss, but it may also be a gift. The present moment is the only real for her. It is where she plants her feet. She knows her memories are fickle and undependable, though she is not aware this is a permanent state of affairs. At times, she is lonely, sad, bored, annoyed; her emotions run the normal gamut, but she holds on to nothing. I have walked in to find her fretting and tearful, but she is easily distracted, and once she is on to something else—a trip to the bathroom, a drink of water, a ride in the elevator—the tears and their cause don't just drift into the past, they vaporize—and in the rising mist she finds me and is always overjoyed.

On this almost Spring-like day, I bundle her into her winter jacket, throw an afghan across her lap, hand her a pair of sunglasses and wheel her out to the courtyard garden. She is smiling and chatty as we park alongside the tiny pond, a fountain spewing water in the center. We sit together watching the cascade. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her mood has changed. She is fretful and her eyes are brimming. I am enjoying the sun on my face and the twitter of the birds and am tempted to call upon my little trick of distraction to bring mom's smile back. Any little bit of small talk—"Hey mom, look at that Robin over there. Is it building a nest?"—and I could restore her equanimity. But, I turn to her with a question of another kind.

"Mom, what's going on for you right now?"

“I hardly ever see Bill anymore.” She says. “He doesn’t even eat with me in the dining room. Do you know where he is?”

I wait. We have had this particular conversation many times before, and each time I have to gage how to respond. My mom met Bill after my father died and they were together for ten years, but Bill passed away over a year ago. I remind her that Bill is dead.

There is a pause as she takes that in. “So I am all alone here?”

“No, not all alone. Andy and I are nearby, and there are other residents and staff who care about you.”

I remain still and she appears to be drifting off, but then she speaks.

“I’m so confused. I feel like I’m floating. I don’t know who I am anymore. I always loved to share my thoughts with people. You know, I was a conversationalist. Now I’m just a listener. Why can’t I connect to anyone? I feel empty. Worse than lonely. This is a wasted life. Who am I now?”

My desire to somehow fix her broken life rises up even as I marvel at her lucidity and the self-reflectiveness of her questions. Instead of a wordy attempt to patch and glue her ragged shards, I offer only my silent presence and the light pressure of my hand on her arm.

We sit together in stillness. After some time she turns to me and says, “Thank you.”