

Connecting: An Interview with Eliezer Sobel

*Author of "Blue Sky, White Clouds" &
"L'Chaim: Pictures to Evoke Memories of Jewish Life"
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When the abilities of someone living with dementia begin to change, friends and loved ones often find it increasingly difficult to find meaningful ways to connect in a personal way. The following is an interview with Eliezer Sobel, a man who was inspired to publish picture books with simple captions that allowed his mother, who is living with Alzheimers, to enjoy images and words that evoked pleasure for her, and often sparked communication and connection with her loved ones. Eliezer created these books because a void exists in the marketplace, a problem that he had the intention to fix so that other families might also be able to enjoy connecting with their loved ones through using the books in the way he has with his mother.



KW: What inspired you to write *Blue Sky, White Clouds* for your mother?

ES: My late father cared for my mother at home until the age of 90, when he fell down the stairs and suffered a traumatic brain injury. My wife and I moved in with my parents that same night and took over managing both of their care. In the years before that, my father had often complained, "I just don't know what activities to do with Mom aside from plunking her down in front of the television and putting on the Dean Martin Comedy Hour DVD for the hundredth time."

KW: So you wanted to create a tool for your father to connect with your mom?

ES: Yes, but mainly for Mom herself to engage with something other than Dean Martin!

KW: Had she always liked photography and pictures?

ES: When she was in the earlier stages of decline we started buying her oversized picture books of Hollywood stars. She loved looking at Clark Gable and her other favorite actors from that era. But any real reading or language seemed to be gone after a number of years, although she still spoke in gibberish, often using words

she made up. ("Felindernooten" was my favorite!) But to our knowledge, she was no longer able to read at all. Then one day I came upon her in the living room flipping through a magazine and I heard her reading the big print headlines aloud in English, correctly. I was completely stunned: "Wow, Mom can still read, even if it's only a three-word phrase!"

I thought it would be easy to find a simple picture book that would be appealing to people with dementia, but I found nothing that was appropriate. I thought, "This can't be." Finally, I called the National Alzheimer's Association and spoke with their librarian, who told me, "Well, we have over 20,000 titles for caregivers." And I said, "No, I'm looking for a book for my *mother*, not the caregiver." She was silent and stumped at first, then finally came up with the name of a single author. So I got that person's books and we used them with Mom, but they still weren't quite what I had envisioned, because they contained illustrated cartoon figures and the captions were a bit long. I wanted to use a list and beautiful photographs with very few words, in large print. I figured I'd make one small step to contribute to the surprising lack of resources available for people living with memory loss. That's how I came to write *Blue Sky, White Clouds*.

KW: You have a nice variety of subject matter. How did you decide what to include?

ES: I had several categories in mind. I knew I primarily wanted people, especially children, older people, and family pictures, but I also wanted some photos of nature, familiar objects, and animals.

KW: I noticed that all the captions have about five words, some less. Are you aware that the normal human brain is able to take in five to eight things at a time? When interacting with people living with dementia, we recommend trying to keep words at five or less.

ES: No, I didn't know that! It was just my intuition to keep it as simple as possible; short and sweet.

KW: So tell me how you came to write the second book, *L'Chaim! Pictures to Evoke Memories of Jewish Life*, because it is very different and very specific.

ES: In the years since I published *Blue Sky, White Clouds*, there are now a few more books for people living with dementia, but it's still under a dozen, so I thought, "I'll keep going, we need more. What's another angle on this?" My mother is a Holocaust refugee, so the culture of being Jewish was very important in my family, so I thought I'd aim the second book of the series at that specific population. There is so much rich imagery, words, holidays, foods and symbols in the world of Judaism. That was a deep well to draw from.

KW: What was the experience of sharing these books with your parents?

ES: My mom would just ignore certain images, but then she would zero in on a photo that really grabbed her attention. There was one photo of an elderly couple.

She would study it for five to ten minutes, actually caressing the faces on the page. She didn't necessarily speak, but sometimes she would communicate in her own way with me or her aide sitting with her. Even if she didn't always read the captions, she was fascinated. You could see she was fully engaged.

KW: If you were looking at either book together with one of your parents, did any kind of relationship get sparked? Did you find this was a way to get connected? Did the experience spark memories?

ES: Yes to all of that. And I also received many positive and moving reports from people who wrote me, who either worked in facilities or were caring for their loved ones at home.

KW: Did you experience any spark with *L'Chaim!*, because, religion, prayer, ritual and community experience go very deep into emotional memory? These experiences are very often a deep and profound part of "who you are." Have you or anyone you've heard about who has used the book had any special, unexpected moments of connection during prayer or ritual, such as lighting the candles?

ES: I did hear from a rabbi/chaplain in Philadelphia who said she never goes out to make her rounds without both of my books in her bag. My father seemed to particularly like to gaze at the bagel with cream cheese!

KW: What are your hopes for these books?

ES: I'd like there to be copies of *Blue Sky* in every memory unit. And there are Jewish memory units in New York and elsewhere that should have *L'Chaim!* available for their residents.

KW: Last question- do you have plans for more books like this?

ES: Maybe Book 3 in the series will be for men. It might have photos that depict sports, carpentry, fathering, commuting and offices, fixing things...there are many categories to explore. For a women-themed book I might need to ask my wife for help!