CAREGIVER'S CORNER

Enjoying Memories With a Loved One With Dementia

By: Hilary Mincenberg, activities coordinator at RoseCrest Assisted Living at St. John Community

Early in her journey with Alzheimer's disease, my mother and I had an interesting conversation. I had hoped that we could reminisce about some family events, so I had brought a photo album. We sat together on the sofa, the album spread across both of our laps. We talked about the holidays captured in the pictures, while I pointed out family members. As the discussion wound down, my mother paused, studied my face for a moment, and said matter-of-factly, "I know you are my daughter, but I can't remember what 'daughter' means."

We returned to the photos again. The pictures of Mom, my sister Nell and myself during one of our yearly vacations on Mackinac Island. I started to talk about some of the memories from those trips, pointing out family members and friends. Mom frowned. "By the way," she said irritably, "That is NOT a picture of us. Clearly it's not. That's my mother, father and me. We were at the shore at Atlantic City, obviously! I'm sure that I haven't the vaguest idea who the rest of those people might be. They must be Mother's or Father's friends."

It was as if an emotional bomb had been detonated. I felt sadness, frustration and tenderness simultaneously. She was so adamant, so sincere in her conviction. Primarily, however, I was afraid—for my mother, but also afraid for myself. I was afraid that she would never remember who anyone was, ever again. I was afraid that I would have to accept this and that I would discover that I was incapable of doing so.

I panicked. I wanted to correct my mother, to prove to her that, indeed, it was our family in the pictures, anything to dispel my fear. Exasperated, I blurted out, "It IS us! On Mackinac! Don't you remember?"

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The moment the words were out of my mouth, I was embarrassed and ashamed of myself. Not only was the answer to the question obvious, it seemed disrespectful and ignorant to ask. Thankfully, I stopped scolding myself long enough to recall some helpful advice from someone who had done a similar "reality check" with their loved one who had dementia: First, I needed to forgive myself for "slipping up," by asking Mom that question. It was a natural response. I could quickly rectify matters by saying I had been mistaken about the identity of the people in the pictures, that the strong family resemblance had confused me.

Next, I could let go of my expectations, stop trying to control the situation and follow my mother's lead. When I made the effort to do these three things, my focus shifted from the facts of the photos to what really mattered—how they made us both feel.

Not seeking a specific outcome also opened up an endless number of memories. Mom talked about her childhood vacations on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, about dating the dancing instructor at the hotel and about swimming with her brother. This brought up memories of her brother's time in the army and of his participation in the testing of a new drug called Penicillin.

What had been an activity that caused pain, became a source of joy. What a fascinating and unexpected gift! I believe that the experience brought us even closer together, and those moments became a treasured part of my own Memory Lane.