

A Knock on the Door

Category: Dementia

written by R. Lynn Barnett | March 7, 2025

Sometimes dementia comes barging in the front door; other times, more stealthily, it comes tip-toeing in the back. My mom's Alzheimer's came in through the back end of things, because it involved picking her up for a potentially life-saving colonoscopy, and if anything signifies the back end of things, it's a colonoscopy! I told her I'd leave my house at 8 *a.m.* to pick her up, but she called me at 8 *p.m.* the night before, asking why I hadn't called. This episode was the conduit for her moving in with my husband and me. She stayed here for her remaining five years.

Living with a mother with Alzheimer's was a learning experience for me. I learned that it's a complex disease, often encompassing delusions, illusions, visual and auditory hallucinations. I learned that, when my mom heard all those voices, the one voice she most needed to hear was mine.

One day she was insistent that someone was knocking on her bedroom door. Since it was adjacent to the laundry room, I said that she must have heard the dryer door opening and closing. Sometimes, she went along with this, and others, I was a "liar, liar, pants in dryer." Her doctor guided my hand in this, telling me that "therapeutic fibbing" for the patient's own good, to avoid further agitation, is fine. So, when she imagined that she played golf with Tiger Woods, I went along with it.

I guess fibbing ran in the family, because Alzheimer's can include "confabulation," which is where the patient makes up stories. Since my mom was an accountant by trade, I like to think that she went from "tabulation" to "confabulation."

During those five years, I discovered two coping strategies that were particularly helpful, and both involve exercise. One was physical exercise, which I got a lot of because my mother was a wanderer! When she wandered out the door, I followed her. Through my experience with my mother's Alzheimer's, I learned that exercise is inherent in the caregiving role.

My other coping strategy is what I refer to as "exercising my right to write." I kept a journal of my caregiving journey, which I turned into a book entitled, *My Mother Has Alzheimer's and My Dog Has Tapeworm: A Caregiver's Tale*. I wrote it with humor and heart, reflecting the way I dealt with my mom. Writing was cathartic, and I hope those who read it found it relatable. Sharing my mom's story brings meaning and purpose to my experience, and gives me hope that what I learned can be helpful

to others.

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