

# Waves

Category: Dementia

written by Sara Lynne Wright | March 30, 2025

“Your dad makes wonderful films. They mean a lot to all of us.” I stood there in my N95 mask and safety goggles next to a 97-year-old in memory care on hospice, mouth agape. How did she know my dad was a filmmaker? Was she psychic?

Moments before, she'd been confabulating, making up memories to fill gaps in her knowledge. She was under five feet tall, weighed less than a hundred pounds, and grew up female in America in the 1930s. Yet she told me she'd beat the biggest prizefighter in Philadelphia in a boxing match. The odds of that being true seemed slimmer than her physique, but she was certainly a fighter.

I was doing an urgent home visit because of an exacerbation of her behavioral symptoms. That morning, she'd swatted and kicked her caregivers when they tried to get her to sit up for breakfast. When I first walked into her room, she'd shouted, “I don't want to see anyone! My dad hasn't come, and he said he was going to come!”

Her dad had passed away decades before. But I knew that, even if someone's perception of reality doesn't seem valid, their feelings always are. Instead of correcting her, I tried to tap into the emotion beneath her words, asking, “When was the last time your son came to visit you?”

“A long time ago! A very long time!”

“You must be lonely,”

“I am. I'm very lonely.”

“I'm sorry. I'm here to make sure you're okay. May I check your oxygen and your pulse?”

“Okay.” A bit of the resistance in her eyes melted away as I put the pulse oximeter on her finger and tried to smile. That's when she told me how wonderful my father's films are.

The evidence-based provider in me thinks it must be pure coincidence that her confabulations included a fact she had no way of knowing. But the part of me that's infinitely curious about spirituality wonders if this woman, near death as she was, was tapping into some kind of universal wisdom.

In Buddhist philosophy there's a concept known as a death wave. Its premise is that life is like a wave that rises out of the ocean of the universe, and death is the natural receding of the wave back into that ocean. In my experience, as people approach the end of the circle of life, they sometimes have an uncanny ability to tap into others' emotions, even circumstances.

The word "dementia," which comes from a Latin word meaning "out of one's mind," feels wrong. Who are we to say that people with dementia are no longer present in their own minds? I've met many people with dementia who have moments of lucidity; some, like this patient, even have moments of seeming transcendence.

I don't want to sugarcoat the fact that dementia can be harrowing. But maybe having one's perception less bound by constraints of time and space can, at times, bring folks with dementia closer to a universal consciousness. Maybe their minds are like waves receding back into the ocean. Maybe we can respect them more if we see it that way.

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