

An Abyss of Not Knowing

Category: Not Knowing

written by Mary Sawyer | April 2, 2019

She looked at me with desperation in her eyes. "I just don't know," she said.

"What's wrong? What don't you know?" I asked. With tears in her eyes and increased urgency in her voice, M insisted, "I just don't know...I don't know. I don't know!" Hands turning white from gripping the armrests of her wheelchair, she slumped over, shut her eyes and shook her head in honest confusion and fear.

I had been visiting M for months. Being over 100 years old in a nursing home, her sense of reality had faded. Every day, M experienced a world that made little sense to her. The nursing schedules, the people, the food: it all shared no resemblance to her earlier memories, which had become her reality. When I asked about her family, she proudly told me that her daughter was just finishing college and her son was a musician in his twenties.

These recollections about her kids were just glimpses into a past she was having trouble recalling. Yet, she could not form new experiences of the present. It became clear to me that she was neither here nor there. She just was.

As a volunteer in hospice care, I was there to be her companion. Spending time with her, I thought that I might be able to provide some certainty and relieve her of the fear of not knowing. However, the severity of her dementia was always going to be a barrier between us.

Looking into her eyes, holding her hand, I asked, "How are you M?" Without realizing it, I had posed an existential question, to which she could only reply, "I just don't know."

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