

Vision

She has advanced Alzheimer disease and is largely out of touch with reality. She often forgets she has a husband and children, and is often lost even in the confines of Wicke Health Center, where she lives. It is not an uncommon description for anyone familiar with such long-term care settings. What may be unfamiliar is the rest of the story. I stopped to see her the other day to discover she was in the dining room listening to "old" favorites on the radio. There she was singing her heart out, remembering the words without an effort. That part of her brain – the part that remembers and appreciates music – was intact. It is why music is such an important tool in reaching dementia and Alzheimer's patients. It often opens emotional doors, long thought closed by their condition.

What really intrigued and touched me deeply was when she began sobbing when a particular song began. I watched for a moment and then went over to see if I could comfort her. "What's wrong? Does something hurt you? Do you not want to hear the music?" Through tears, with the hint of a smile lighting up her face, she responded. "No I love being here, hearing the music. My husband used to sing that song to me. I love my husband. He loves me too!"

A moment of clarity brought on by familiar music! A moment of good, warm feelings! No confusion! No fear! No anxiety! Just joyful tears! It was a beautiful – albeit fleeting moment! It did not last, but it was a gracious respite. More it was a reminder that such people can be reached at some level some of the time. It was a reminder to keep trying to talk to the seemingly "out of it" residents. It was a reminder – God given, I believe – to continually try new approaches with such folks.

Oftentimes I see family members frustrated by their inability to "reach" their loved ones. I wish they could see what I saw, and what I see. I wish they would be creative in their visits. I wish they could see the response from residents when their family members bring in old picture albums and other mementos. I wish they could see the glimmers of recognition on faces that are often blank. And I wish everyone who ministers to and with such people would see all of the above. Rather than bemoaning the fact that loved ones have been so affected by dementia and Alzheimer's, wishing to bring them into the present reality, why not meet them where they often are - in the past. They just might find comfort and joy in the moment as a result.

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