



Thanksgiving and Caregiving

November 21, 2012

This is going to be my first Thanksgiving without my mom.

Both of my parents are now gone and some days it hits harder than others. Sadly, it's the reality of my life now and the reality of Thanksgivings to come.

Every year my family hosted Thanksgiving dinner. And I still have the memories of watching the Macy's Day Parade and later Miracle on 34th Street, as the yummy scents from mom's cooking and baking wafted through the air. As I grew older, it eventually became mom and me cooking and baking together.

My mom was a great cook, but she was an even better baker, which many of my friends can attest to. So of course, I couldn't wait to learn her secrets of baking from scratch. Even after my dad passed, and though the family dynamics changed, mom and I still kept cooking and baking because it's what we loved to do and people would still drop by. If we went to someone else's house for dinner, we still cooked a Thanksgiving meal because we liked having our own goodies to snack on at home.

But as Alzheimer's started winning the battle over my mom, her ability to cook and do other things became diminished. And as other caregivers know, if you have a loved one with Alzheimer's you don't want them near the stove or oven anyway. But because the holidays were always such a special time in our home, it was hard to know that Thanksgiving didn't have any real meaning to her anymore, it was just another day.

Yet I still carried on with cooking, baking, and, of course, having the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on the TV which mom loved watching. She would comment on how big the balloons were and she loved seeing the singing and performances. It seems music is very soothing to most people with Alzheimer's.

As years passed, it was a learning lesson that no matter how much I wanted things to be "normal", Alzheimer's has another plan. As it changes the person, so too does it change the personality and thought process, and you have to recreate your new normal.

It's understandable how much you want your loved one to understand what the holidays means and what's going on. But as a caregiver, you have to rethink how you do things, how you celebrate and what language you use to explain what is going on to ensure that they don't feel bad or get upset because they are not grasping the day.

One particular Thanksgiving we went to my Aunt's for dinner and I recall at some point looking at my mom and noticing that she didn't look happy. Not long after, she wanted to know when were we going home.

When we got home (not the home she envisioned in her mind), she said she wanted to see her family and I told her we were with family, but of course she was shaking her head no.

I knew in her mind she meant her parents and sister who are no longer with us. It's times such as that when you as a caregiver need patience in handling those moments and strength to keep from getting overly affected as you observe the changes and see the person you once knew is fading. Dare I say the holidays can be an especially crazy time for caregivers as you care for your loved one while trying to enjoy the festivities of the season.

My first recommendation is to try to be as proactive as you can in knowing what you need to keep your loved one comfortable, calm and happy. Having guests over — whether it's family or friends a large gathering of people — can be overwhelming and confusing for a person with Alzheimer's. While you shouldn't keep them from the festivities, perhaps if you can find a quiet area where they can sit, perhaps have soft music playing in the background and then those who want to see and talk with your loved one, can go to him/her a few at a time.

Or perhaps they can do some activity with them, but be prepared: if they start to get agitated you may have to let others do the work and you be the one to sit with your loved one because yours is the face they will recognize.

Another way to engage your loved one is to find a small job for them to do. If you're cooking, for instance, see if they would like to mash the potatoes or fold napkins. I found in my journey that, in addition to the care you need to be creative and remember regardless of the changes, there's still a person inside who needs to be loved.

I also discovered whenever mom and I were out with friends or family, people were more understanding and willing to help than I thought. My advice is to take the help. And if you happen to be reading this and you're not a caregiver, but know someone who is, please think about offering to help in some way.

If they are like how I was, I never asked for help because I didn't want my challenges to be put on anyone else, but I was so thankful when it was offered and given.

I want to wish you and yours a wonderful Thanksgiving. Although my mom is no longer with me, her wonderful baking recipes are as well as the wonderful memories both she and my dad gave me. I am very thankful.

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