

WHERE SHE IS ...

Pamela Graesser, M.Ed, LCMHC*
Director of Counseling Services, Rivier College

My mother went missing five years ago. She didn't leave all at once. It was like she just quietly slipped out of the room for longer and longer periods of time. Her doctors call it Alzheimer's and they offer no hope that she may one day find her way back to me.

Our relationship begins anew each time I visit with her. I search for threads of continuity from one visit to the next. I have no battle with this woman. Our unresolved issues belong to another time and place, another woman. We have traveled this journey together she and I. I have gone from being her daughter to being the nice woman who will help her find her daughter. And now, unaware that she has me at all, she has returned to the company of her parents and long deceased relatives.

It began over a cup of coffee seated at the counter of our local coffee shop. I stepped away for a second and my mother asked the woman seated next to her "who is that nice young woman sitting next to me?" It culminated in my mother leaving her home and joining the ranks of so many other elderly unable to care for themselves. Forever etched in my mind, I hold the image of her leaving my childhood home for the last time. This image is one I cannot let go of and perhaps, one I need to keep.

My mother was a teacher of third graders for her entire adult life. Even today, she is a teacher. It is not unusual to arrive on her unit, only to find her trying to maintain some order in her classroom. Her voice rises over the din of her class as she calls for quiet. She stubbornly refuses to give up on her students, even those that are clearly disruptive, and hardly aware that class is in session.

My mother spends her days with a diverse cast of characters. In the mornings when I enter her unit, I am greeted by Vern who sits patiently by the door, day after day, waiting for his wife to walk through. I do not know if she ever does. John is a handsome man with beautiful brown eyes that are always focused in another time and place. His fingers move rapidly as he deals from an imaginary deck of cards. I like to imagine that he was a dealer in Atlantic City and that other dealers envied his skill and artistry with cards. Zelda, a holocaust survivor can be found hugging herself in silent anguish in the corner of the day room. James cries all day, while Nan, a former teacher, counts endlessly from one to forty eight over and over again.

My mother is my only surviving link to my childhood and my history. I am already grieving the loss of that connection. She requires me to live in the moment as really that is all that we have. We sit in silence most days and I hold her hand, something we never did before. It is a small connection but so powerful. For her it is about texture and warmth and presence. For me, it is the holding of our history. This moment, this contact with her, all we have, all that matters.

* PAMELA GRAESSER is the Director of Counseling Services. She joined the staff at Rivier in 1992. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from Keene State College and a Master in Counseling Psychology from Antioch New England University. She serves on the Emergency Operations Planning Committee, the Behavioral Assessment Team and is a Co-Chair of the Task Force on Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drugs. Pamela credits her mother with teaching her to live in the moment.