

The Open Gate  
Susan J. Pearson and Mary Alyce Pearson

As many of you know, my mother's mother, my grandmother, also suffered from Alzheimer's disease. My mother lived with the fear and the – to her – certain knowledge that she, too, would suffer from this disease.

And so while it is a tragedy that this awful disease has spanned the generations of women in her family, it was also in its own way a gift.

I say that it was a gift because my grandmother's experience with Alzheimer's allowed me to witness my mother process what it means to lose someone to this disease. Whether she knew it or not, my mother was teaching me how to think about dementia and how to continue to shine a light of love into its dark spaces.

One of the ways that my mother taught me this was through her writing. She wrote about her mother's Alzheimer's and she meant for this writing to provide comfort not just to herself, or to her family, but to all those who lose their loved ones to this disease.

So what I'm going to share with you today is a piece my mother wrote and published on the Alzheimer's Association website.

It's called "The Open Gate."

**The Open Gate (by Mary Alyce Pearson)**

"Does she still recognize you?" That question usually surfaced in any conversation with family and friends about my mother's Alzheimer's disease. It was intended to express concern for me, but over time I realized it was a question reflecting their fears about this disease that moves like an unstoppable robot on a relentless mission to destroy what we define as human about ourselves-mind, memory, and consciousness.

Given I lived four hours by plane from the nursing home, I knew that dramatic and subtle changes took place between visits. Over time as her speech capacity diminished, I realized how easy it was to lapse into my mother's silence. I vowed that on subsequent visits, I would make every effort to talk with her knowing it wasn't going to be a two-way conversation.

On each visit, walking from the parking lot to the nursing home, I asked myself, "Will she know me?" She had progressed in three years from seeing me as daughter to a person who had a wonderful smile, the next step being non-recognition. Entering the lobby area, meant to be a sea of normalcy for visitors, decorated with floral sofas, walnut wooden tables, framed prints of pastoral scenes and vases of fresh flowers, I punched in the simple code outside the Alzheimer wing, the buzzer offered acceptance and I

opened the door ready to immerse myself in a community of patients, staff and visitors that had become familiar to me.

Arriving after breakfast, I knew activities dominated the next few hours: making cookies, stringing bead bracelets, playing a question and answer game, doing exercises including dancing. My mother who loved to dance would grab Art, another patient, and twirl him around the room. And I discovered that Art, a former factory supervisor, would enter the TV room at odd times and announce, "It's 4:00, time to go home everyone." He didn't care that no one left the room. Besides, they were home.

My mother, despite the loss of speech capacity, retained other ways of communicating with me. I could tell from the way she touched my arm standing next to me, her eyes appraising my clothes and current haircut that she knew me as daughter at that stage. She had other ways. Sitting outside with her on a bench, another patient sat down and began talking with me. I glanced at my mother who had stuck a finger in the corner of her mouth pulling it down, this a gesture learned from her Swiss-Italian mother, which meant "half mouth", subtly indicating the speaker as insincere. She rolled her eyes with a tight grimace of closed lips to let me know when she disapproved of another patient, a staff member or her food. Conversely, when she liked another person, she would just touch her on the shoulder as each passed the other silently in the hallway.

After lunch one visit, we went to my mother's room. She lay down on the bed but kept her eyes open. I pulled the chair closer to the bed quietly studying her face and her gnarled and wrinkled hands. Then I remembered my vow about talking. I glanced at the collage of family photographs on the wall opposite the foot of her bed. I pointed to one of my father and mother taken at my wedding. I was twenty-one, they were close to sixty.

"You and Daddy certainly look dapper in that picture. Remember my wedding?" Surprisingly to me, she turned her eyes toward the photograph.

Getting up from the chair, I took a few steps to stand beside the wall of photos. "Hard to believe Matthew is in college" You know he loves you very much." Her eyes were on the photos and on me. I pointed to another, the rhythm of expressing love easily intertwining with the photographs.

"Susan still has Grandma Bear, even now in high school. She, too, loves you very much." Her face was intensely focused in an all-consuming attention.

"And here's you, Dante and Sonny in your backyard, wow, we all look young in that picture. Dante and Sonny love you very much." A smile broke her concentrated look. She stammered a lilting "Ooooooh."

"David is still a college professor. He loves you too."

Driven by her rapt attention, I went photo by photo watching her face quizzically looking at me as if she were trying to will by sheer determination a re-wiring of her brain to understand what I was saying to her. It seemed as if my words had found a hidden gate within her that had been left slightly ajar, most of the other gates already tightly locked.

"And of course, I love you very much," I said, returning to her bedside, giving her a hug.

We fell into a peaceful silence, looking at one another until her eyelids grew heavy and she fell asleep.