

One Moment at a Time

I parked my car in the nursing home parking lot, eager to spend another day with a very special eighty-six year old woman, residing in a memory enhancement unit. My social work graduate program was coming to an end, which sparked a bittersweet feeling. I was excited to begin my career as a social worker, yet already felt the loss of this part-time job of nearly two years. I took a deep breath, and entered the nursing home feeling prepared for the day.

We sat gazing out of the window on that cold winter morning, counting the wild turkeys gathered on the patio, "1, 2, 3, 4." It was quite a sight to see. Some people might crawl back in to bed and under the covers on such a dreary and brisk morning, but Sofia enjoyed counting, "1, 2, 3, 4." I put on the Beatles to help keep the mood light and assist Sofia getting dressed for her day. She tapped her foot to the music while combing out her hair, an activity that required great consideration. I cleaned around her room while giving her some privacy. "Where are you?" she asked as I seemed out of sight. "I'm right here," I said with a smile, and moved to her line of vision. I was always right there, in the moment, without thinking too far in advance and not worried about any troubles we might have faced before that moment in time. I met her where she was at.

Sofia put on her eyebrow pencil, lipstick, and jewelry. She chose her clothes from the few options I gave her. She graciously looked at me, "You have beautiful eyebrows." I've never given my eyebrows too much thought, but I could see how much she liked looking at them. "You have such nice hair, I'll comb it out," she told me. I purposely wore my hair down that day, because I knew Sofia would want to comb it and put it in a ponytail. I sat in the chair as she thoughtfully combed each strand and warned me not to touch it. I let her spray ounces of hairspray, to the point where she felt it was just right. She asked me where we were going, and I reassured her that we were going to have a nice breakfast with some pancakes and prunes, a meal I knew she enjoyed.

After breakfast, Sofia had enough energy to go for a nice walk outside. We looked around the ground, "It is nice and clean out here," she commented. She enjoyed the details of what was right in front of her. We looked at the sky, "It is such a beautiful sky," she noted. The sky was cloudy and it was cold, but Sofia's conviction did really make me believe it was beautiful. We were bundled up, with locked arms, and kept walking until she was ready to go back inside.

We enjoyed some warm tea and took a rest. I asked Sofia if I could sit in her chair while she napped, and she replied, "Do whatever your heart desires." I thought about that to myself. I always enjoyed hearing her phrases and still think of her wise words from time to time. She woke up later to see a photo of her and a man resting above her armoire, "He is a good looking

man,” she chuckled. It was a photo of her and her husband. She fell in love with him again every time she saw the photo.

Night came, and it was time for a shower. The shower was a dreadful activity which involved various strategies to help Sofia feel comfortable. Sometimes I told her that I would take a shower as well and she was motivated to trek to the shower together. There were other times she refused the shower with that same strategy and very bluntly stated, “Good. Then you take a shower.” It was often difficult to predict her response, but I learned that I needed to adapt to her behavior. Sometimes she told me that she already took a shower and tried to convince me that she did not need one. I had to occasionally walk away and come back a few minutes later to try again. There were many moments I needed to be creative and flexible, in order to meet her needs.

That night, it took about half of an hour to get into the bathroom. We overcame our obstacles and finished with a great sigh. Sofia looked at me, “I feel *wunderbar!*” I felt *wunderbar* too. She told me how sweet I was and appreciated every step of the way as I gave her one sock at a time, one pant leg at a time, one sleeve at a time. She then asked me how my mother was doing, and my father. She asked about my husband and my children. She questioned where I lived before the war too. Sofia was a Holocaust survivor and sometimes believed that I lived through the war with her. I stayed in her reality and thoughtfully answered her questions. I saw how tired she was, yet she still cared about me and my life. I helped her get in to bed and shut the lights. She spoke softly and said, “Oye. Good night, I love you.” I loved hearing that. “I love you too, Sofia.”

Sofia recently passed away, and I often reflect on my work with her, including how this experience shapes my continuing role as a licensed social worker with the geriatric population. I learned the advantages of individualized care, the benefits of collaborating with families and other service providers, and especially how quality of life can be improved with support and tactful interventions. I often think about our society, and if it is prepared for the dramatic increase in older adults, many of which will be diagnosed with some form of dementia. Perhaps our society can share this perspective, that helping this population often brings many more benefits, and that we receive more than what we give. In my experience, the direct support I provided Sofia led to much more than a career in working with older adults.

My role was to be her companion, and she quickly became mine. To see the wild turkeys, to hear the music, to smell and taste the pancakes at breakfast time, to feel the cold on her skin and the love in a photo were experiences that she was able to recognize and truly appreciate. I have learned from her and we can all learn from her. We should not take our world for granted: each life stage is equally valuable, no matter what losses an individual experiences. Each day, each hour, each minute, and each second spent with Sofia was a

moment worthily spent. Whether someone identifies as a geriatric healthcare professional, a caregiver, a family member, or a friend, we can enhance our practices with older adults by learning the significance and the everlasting indebtedness of meeting individuals where they are at, one moment at a time.