

I Can't Fix This
By
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I can't fix this.

Last night, I lay awake and tossed and turned. Feelings of helplessness and worry ran marathons in my brain. Crisscrossing its gray folds, racing across synapses, clocking mile after mile. My heart pounded. Thud, thud, thud. My skin prickled with hot flashes that quickly changed to goosebumps.

I can't fix this.

I have formidable strength, will, and intellect. Once determined, I can solve just about any problem. I am a project manager and have never in my career left a project unfinished. And, most were completed superbly.

Not Mother's Alzheimer's. I can't fix this.

I can't stop her delusions, her brain misfirings, her confusion, or her depression. I can't make her feet move faster no matter what kind of orthopedic shoes I put on them. I can't help her understand how to eat food already cut for her or to not take a sandwich fully apart before taking small bites of only one part of it. I can't explain the bright lights she claims to see around her or the man she thinks owns every truck, car, and motorcycle we see, the man she talks about repeatedly, the man who has some strange hold on her brain.

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Her decline will not stop. It will only continue. In her regressive journey, she is now near toddlerhood. You can hear it in the childish tone of her voice as she sings favorite hymns, Christmas carols, and Frank Sinatra tunes. You can see it in the

innocence of her sky-blue eyes as she looks at you trustingly, querying where to put the used toilet paper, where to turn next in a strange or familiar place, when you will return.

You see the two-year-old in her when she cries so easily in the middle of all of the frustration within which she lives. Frustration, confusion, sadness, and most encompassing of all, loss. She has lost so much:

Freedom.

Intellect.

Mobility.

Beauty.

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I meditate. I journal. I reflect. I desperately try to understand. And, then, I read:

“We can do no great things, only small things with great love.” Mother Theresa

So, I do the small things. I kiss her. I stroke her back. I tenderly brush her hair. I help her apply her brilliant red lipstick. I cut her food. I place the pillow behind her back. I offer her ginger ale. I sit with her on the patio. I point out the clouds, the sky, the breeze.

I ignore the illogical, the insane, the ridiculous. I try to get her talking about happy times from the past. I don't question the mixed-up stories that cross decades, confuse locations, attribute actions to family members who couldn't possibly have been part of whatever memory she is revisiting. I try desperately to keep my own long pent-up feelings of resentment and disappointment at bay and look at this ever-shrinking woman

whose life is closing in around her in smaller and smaller, more binding concentric circles of experiences she cannot fathom, that pale so in comparison to her world travels, cruise ship adventures, art shows, operas, and gala events. This woman, who at fifty, finished a Master's degree, who spent a career performing with orchestras, conducting choirs, teaching students to use their voices to God's glory or to operatic effect, who studied and collected art and jewelry and clothing and well-recognized acquaintances.

Now, her life consists of kind strangers who do the small things to get her through another day. She is at their mercy. She is limited by their schedules. She is at turns grateful, singing her thank yous at the top of her soprano voice, and at others, bitter, as she insists it is time to get dressed and start her day at three in the morning and why are the caregivers not at her beck and call, obeying her every confused command.

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And, I can't ignore the deep ache of my grief as I watch her continue in her spiraling decline. I am experiencing her losses along with my own. I am losing my mother. This living being with whom I spend time is her and it is not her. I feel sad and not up to the task. I wish for her suffering to end and I feel the paralyzing weight of guilt for such thoughts. Alzheimer's is a wicked, heartless, formidable enemy. It will be victorious. It has already won every battle as we wrestle together for my mother's soul, for her comfort, for her happiness. And, I am no Mother Theresa. I wrestle with myself and all of the feelings that overwhelm me as I attempt to do the small things with great love. I feel impotent and unsuccessful.

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