

Sitting with my Mother at the Lake at Sunset

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This poem, “Sitting with my Mother at the Lake at Sunset,” is for professional helpers about a former professional helper who is now living with dementia. As her daughter, as a poet, and as practitioner trained in poetry therapy, I am also speaking as a family caregiver. The poem is about the moments of insight that inform our relationships with those for whom we are caring, particularly the moments where a clear response to a request is not grantable. In this poem, I strive to reach beyond the surface of memory’s narrative to access the livingness of each present moment that I am still able to share with my mother. I don’t always understand the complex reality she is experiencing in each of those moments, but each is nevertheless a blessing, and wherever she is in her process, I’ll try to meet her there.

It was after my father died of complications from cancer surgery at age 69 that my mother—a recently retired registered nurse, hospice administrator and end-of-life ethicist—faced living alone for the first time in her life. She was, in a way, an “expert” on grief, having taught about it as well as experienced it personally. No grief is easy, but she faced her widowhood with resolve and her usual grace, including through the loss of her second husband a decade and a half later. By that time she’d begun to exhibit dementia symptoms and could no longer live alone. My brother and I decided to move her to live with me in South Florida. Just before the move, she and I visited a beautiful park where my brother had mentioned spending time with her. She and I were in my car, gazing out over a quiet lake at the setting sun when the scene depicted in the poem took place.

SITTING WITH MY MOTHER AT THE LAKE AT SUNSET

She asks me if I spoke with him today,
her husband, gone two years. We watch the sun
setting over the lake, each fading ray
casting shadows through Spanish moss—what’s gone
still palpable. A bench just ahead of us
beckons, but we decide to remain here
in the car, considering the fuss
of her walker over leaves and roots. We’re
near enough. “I haven’t spoken to him,”
I say, wanting to avoid what happened
last time—the panic, the recognition,
eventually, of the truth. “Have you?” *When
this moment has passed, I think, we’ll be good.*
“Not since this morning,” she answers at last.
“I’d like to give him a call if I could
to let him know I’m here.” It’s a fair ask.
I’m a dancer among complications,
ducks flying out of sight. I hear their call.
“We’ll call soon,” I say. Her quiet patience
surrounds us. The last drops of sunlight fall
between us and the far horizon of
the lake. Pink and orange droplets. The park
now tucked in shadow. Unnamable love.
My hand on hers as we drive through the dark.

As a professor of literature as well as a writer, I offer this poem to the caregiving community as a reflection of how poetry can capture the nuances of life in simple but relatable language. I chose a formal structure for the poem, which means there are the same number of syllables in each line, and the last word of every other line rhymes, although that rhyme may be soft and subtle, rather than “sing-song-y.” I’ve found that the rhyme schemes and regular meters of formal poetry offer boundaries within which strong and otherwise unwieldy feelings can be safely expressed; hence the iambic pentameter (five “heartbeats” per line) and every-other-line rhyme scheme of “Sitting with my Mother at the Lake at Sunset.” The poem’s formal structure thus becomes part of its meaning.

Throughout my career as a humanities professor, it is literature such as this that has inspired my understanding of human relationships, especially those portrayed in formal poetry—that of Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, Gwendolyn Brooks, Edna St. Vincent Millay, W.B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bishop, and so many others. Teaching their works and writing my own sonnets, villanelles, and other formal poems have provided a place for expressing emotions from sorrow to joy. Poets and their readers can find in poetry a “safe harbor” for strong or confusing emotions.

Put another way, a poem can offer a kind of container for ideas and feelings that otherwise evade articulation. Whether reading aloud or reading to oneself silently, one can feel the rhythm of the poem replicating the inhalation and exhalation of physical breathing. Relaxing into a momentary respite from professional demands, the caregiver may find a kind of freedom in the very human reflection of a momentary insight that the poem conveys, and, by doing so, emerge from the reading refreshed. While the complexities of providing care to a person with dementia can be overwhelming, the poem's structure—its evenness and symmetry—represent a sense of order. Its rhyme scheme also functions to soothe and to smooth out edges of uncertainty, or rather to provide reassurance that even amidst the complications, one can find peace in the regularities of language, much as a selection of favorite music can carry a listener beyond the surface of events—another form of self-care.

Of particular use to the professional caregiver, in addition to its empathetic moment of insight into a human experience relevant to the caregiving role, is this poem's glimpse into the way formal poetry can provide a safety valve of sorts for expressing grief or doubt about the best course of action when caring for and responding to a person with dementia. The poem not only functions as a window into a mother's life through her daughter's eyes, heart, and words, but also provides a moment of respite for the professional caregiver taking time out of a busy schedule to read a poem, reinforcing the need for self-care and self-compassion among caregivers in addition to the compassion given to the recipient of that care. It reminds us that those we help, whether "patients" or caregivers, have a history, relationships, and their own ways of coping. It is wise of us to remain curious and creative in finding ways to connect with people whoever they appear to be and wherever they are on the trajectory of life's journey.

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