

TWO PEAS IN A POD

By Karalee Jacobs

An unlikely pairing, Alice Julia and Karalee Kay. An idea planted by the suggestion of adoption, from Dr Hickman at Seattle Orthopedic (Children's Hospital). Nine months after losing a daughter, Don and Alice, brought home a 3-week-old baby girl. While this is how the story begins, it's the "present" that really matters.

Mom (81) and daughter (49), close friends, traveling companions, roommates, and two peas in a pod. A scenario that would scare others in the best of circumstances. Most days it was easy, peaceful, and effortless. Because of unconditional love and true acceptance of one another. That is until Alzheimer's disease entered the picture, and then eventually demanded 24-hour care.

The thought was overwhelming and heartbreaking. The shift from daughter to caregiver. I'm in charge and responsible for someone else and I've never been a mother. Meeting the present needs of Alice seemed impossible to fulfill. Find help at home while I'm at work, locate an adult daycare close to home, manage vitamins and pills, schedule and attend Doctor appointments, find an attorney, take over finances, make home safer, grocery shop, cook, do laundry, clean house, attend to Alice's social calendar, and after three long months of 24-hour care, find some respite care options.

All of these items required attention and yet the real issue was trying to understand the illness of Alzheimer's, the continuing changes in Alice, and ultimately the changes in me and our relationship. It wasn't easy and effortless anymore. We had to find a new way of living with the ever changing aspects of Alzheimer's (is it hard to say and spell because it's so complicated and cruel?). This would take time which neither of us had. I was terrified. We were no longer two peas in a pod.

I wasn't sure if I could cope or accept the changes, so I reached out in faith and fear. First to our family friend and retired nurse Robin Sather. Then eventually calling the Alzheimer's Association (was sorry I waited so long), contacting Senior Services of Snohomish County, meeting with Debbie Cook at the Stillaguamish Senior Center, signing up for the RDAD study with Jennifer Jones (a gem in Alice's words), joining a support group facilitated by Debbie Cook (my lifeline), taking a free class at Fire District 19 in Silvana for first aid, CPR, and AED training (yes, I brought Alice too), and reading as much literature as I could before falling asleep at night.

At the heart of it all, I discovered I had to work on me. Change my behavior, my language, and my (our) world as I knew it. With great determination and out of fierce love for Alice, I was

willing to try. The most surprising part for me was discovering what would be the easiest and hardest things to endure.

The easiest: bathing, dressing, grooming, including the time the hot water wouldn't work in mom's shower and we had to shower together in mine. I told her it was like being in the bath houses in Japan, where we both visited on separate trips. One of the biggest surprises was during a bedtime meltdown. Alice said "I don't know anything anymore". So I asked, "What's your name?" She answered, "Alice." I asked, "What's my name?" She answered, "I don't know." So I asked, "Who am I?" She answered, "You're my daughter." I said, "You know your name is Alice and that I'm your daughter, that's all that matters." It was enough to calm her down.

The hardest: the truth and "fibulation" (Not disclosing the whole truth with no ill will intended; for the sole purpose of acting in the person's best interest, Kristyan Clouse), a word I learned at support group. Examples include starting adult day care at Leaside Manor. Being a new "Mom," I told Alice in advance, then learned the hard way to tell her when we were in the car on our way (even though she loved it once we arrived, was happy there, and smiling when I picked her up). We call it going to Susan's house now. Some fibs were omissions, not answering questions, or changing the subject. One recent fib was not correcting Alice when she said thanks for the wine (it was Pom juice in a wine glass). Another trick was setting her bedroom clock ahead so she didn't fight me so hard at bedtime.

I'm finding treasures living in the present and celebrating moments. An expected gift from Alzheimer's. Hearing my Mom call me lady bug lady bug, the words rolling off her tongue one right after the other like a melody. Out of the blue hearing my Mom say I loved you the moment I saw you. At bedtime hearing my Mom say I love you forever and ever to the stars. Warm words I cherish and will hold on to when she no longer remembers I'm her daughter.

Thinking outside the box is saving our relationship and making our days easier and often full of joy, yes, real joy. Finding new ways of coping and learning to live in the moment makes my role as caregiver and daughter possible. While we may no longer be two peas in a pod, I like to think of us as peas and carrots living in the "present."