

My Mother Lost and Found by Tangles

Alzheimer's Disease: "Scientists are not absolutely sure what causes Alzheimer's Disease, but plaques and tangles are prime suspects in cell death and tissue loss in the Alzheimer's brain." Alz.org.

This was the first sentence I read when I had my initial suspicion that my mother might have Alzheimer's Disease. That was the beginning of the lost and found of my mother as her tangled brain began to take the mother I once had and to replace her with a mother new to me at every visit.

I am a CZT and I love Zentangle and have met and become close to many people across the world who use the Zentangle method to draw repetitive patterns and who appreciate the art that they create. I have truly felt a gratefulness to Rick Roberts and Maria Thomas for sharing their method of Zentangle drawing. Until my mother's stay at a Memory Care Facility, I had only, while tangling, experienced the joy of doing something creative with a roadmap to an end destination of a beautiful piece of artwork. I enjoyed learning and practicing the processes of appreciation and focus; yet also admit that I already felt calm and relaxed in my life before learning the act of tangling. I valued Zentangle more for the artwork I created than as a relaxation tool or healing journey. That all changed as my mother's illness tangled us both into its powerful destruction.

Some days as I sat in my car before entering the facility where my mother lived as she endured the confounding journey through the changes the disease brings; I would talk to myself, breathing deeply as I reminded myself to accept the "now" and to take "one stroke at a time" on this visit. Rick and Maria's Zentangle Method encourages us not to focus on a plan to make a beautiful composition; but to enjoy, slowly and deliberately, the flow of the ink onto paper that is designed to perfectly accept that flow of ink while also encouraging us to concentrate, one stroke at a time, on the pattern that has been deconstructed for us by others. The wonderful staff at the facility had already identified the patterns of the disease, and there were many outside resources to gather knowledge of the path that Mom's disease would take. I realized that I was going to have to meet the challenges "one stroke at a time."

The Zentangle Method teaches us that there are no mistakes, only opportunities. There were times when I was faced with having to let the loving and caring staff know that an aspect of Mom's care had not been provided properly. Often times, they wanted to apologize, and they seemed to genuinely feel bad that they had failed my mother and me. The constant reminder of the Zentangle Method coupled with the philosophy that there are no mistakes, only opportunities, helped me assure them that it did not matter to me what mistakes had been made, but only that we could go forward to achieve better care. I assured them that once we looked back at the whole picture and process, we would not notice that there had been mistakes. They were caring and experienced caregivers, following a well thought out pattern; but sometimes they were faced with the knowledge that they didn't always follow the pattern as closely as they intended.

Mom's brain was literally shrinking during her time with the disease. There were many moments while trying to express herself, that nonsensical phrases or words would find their way into our conversations, and early in the disease she could recognize this. It helped her when I would once more explain that the

disease was tangling her thoughts inside her brain, but that it didn't matter because I still knew the essence of her, and that, for us, there were no mistakes. I could always feel her relief and see her body relax with those words. It was indeed a challenge to watch my mother, the one who raised me and taught me and supported me, become the one who always needed me for all things as she lost the ability to remember or find interest in my life outside that room. Most details of who I was to her, and of all that once had meaning to both of us, was forever lost in the tangled mess spreading through her brain. And yet, one area of our lives that remained simple and straight forward and somehow connected our past selves to now, was when I showed Mom the Zentangle tiles I had made. In the present, she and I were able to appreciate the art together. We felt the paper, we absorbed the art, and we enjoyed the moment. At those times, we could both be present, with our senses filled with appreciation and love.

While Mom and I sat for many of our hours with music from the 1940's playing on the adaptive Alzheimer's radio, in the otherwise quiet of her room, I began to truly feel the power of tangling. When not engaged directly in conversation, Mom might stare blankly into the room with the inability to formulate her thoughts. She would often repetitively stroke her quilt that my daughter had made for her or run her hands, continually up and down the lace on her pillow. I might sit in her overstuffed chair, with the light flooding through her window, and tangle. I became accustomed to the sound of her movements and breath which combined seamlessly with the sound of my ink flowing from my 01 Micron onto the beautifully prepared Zentangle tile. No outcome was expected from her or from me or from the ink on the paper. We two would be lost in our separate, but very much joined existence. We were surrounded by the sounds of change, of emptiness and grief, and of loneliness and companionship. The sounds of the music in the room and the repetitions of our hands were both excruciating and comforting, at once. Sometimes the tears would just stream down my cheeks, and at other times I would feel such joy to be able to share that moment in time with Mom. Often, as I broke the silence of the room with my voice, it would be to say, "Look, Mama, what I drew!" And instantly, I was like a child again, laying in front of my mother, something for her to appreciate. I always received her smile and felt her pride and love.

Moving my mother into a Memory Care Facility required me to lie to her. It is one of the hardest things to reconcile, lying for a good cause. She needed the transition to be able to live as carefree as possible, and so I told her it was to be closer to me, which was true. I said that it was temporary so that I could take her to a special back doctor, which was, of course, untrue. Getting her there with that lie was easy. Leaving her, knowing that she wouldn't remember what I had said and wouldn't know where she was, was not so easy. The first time I left her there was for a few minutes to get a meal, but when I returned, she was overwhelmed with panic. My heart surely broke just a little at that moment. At the time, she could still read, and so all I could think to do was to plaster her walls with notes that would say that I would be back. The paper I had available and the ink with which to write were Zentangle Tiles and my 01 Micron. I cherished that paper, and it was perfect for what I needed to do. I made signs that said: "I love you! Love, Katrina." "I will see you tomorrow. Love, Katrina." "Take your walker with you. Love, Katrina." "You are safe here. Love, Katrina." "Pull this string if you need help. Love, Katrina." and "You are loved. Love,

Katrina". All these signs were taped all around her room on this beautiful and fine paper, my Zentangle paper, and somehow that gave me comfort. When comfort was hard to find, those Zentangle tiles anchored me to her there in that room, and it was huge. Over the period of the sixteen months of her being there, the signs changed, but I always used the Zentangle tiles. Signs now became "This is the bathroom. Love, Katrina." "These are socks. Love, Katrina." Or "The food here is safe. Love, Katrina." I always kept the one up, though, that read, "I will see you tomorrow. Love, Katrina," because she didn't know what time was, and even if I didn't visit for a couple days, she always thought it was tomorrow.

I was faced with a certain kind of loneliness while with Mom, and, too, while away from her. Missing her so terribly, and yet going to visit and not finding her there, but a different her, was often overwhelming. I told my family that it felt like homesickness for my mother while I was away at camp as a child; surrounded then by peers with fun things to do, yet still with an achy loneliness inside. This time, however, I found myself surrounded and supported by this newfound group of tangles who helped ease my loneliness with their compassion and support. I felt understood. Of course, not all CZTs and tangles have known the pain of losing a mom, little by little with Alzheimer's, like I did; but there seems to be a common thread of the people I have met who tangle who are sincere and caring people. The bond we all have in the world of Rick and Maria's Zentangle Method of drawing, combined with the knowledge that we all experience gratitude and appreciation while facing what we have to do with a blank piece of paper, whether in art or life, makes us more compassionate towards each other's challenges and struggles. There are so very many tangles that are happy to share what the Zentangle Method has done for them during trying times. Zentangle has been an amazing experience for me. Having so many supporting CZTs speak with me about my mother has been something that has eased the loneliness I have felt.

Often, I would think of my Mom's disease and my perception of her as like being in a house of mirrors. There were bizarre moments when I would be astounded at the progression of the effects on her ability to remember, take direction, chew food, swallow, groom, communicate or even stay present. I would think of the string on a Zentangle tile. Zentangle Method involves drawing a string. The string separates the tile into sections within which a tangle draws different tangles. Often, I thought that I had a section of Mom's new day figured out and completed, like explaining to her the cause of the noise in the hall. I would finish that concern and fill in the section of the string, but it became more like trying to find my way out of a house of mirrors. A moment later she would again be so startled by the noise, forgetting all about the comforting explanation, now imagining an unruly intruder trying to enter her room. The border was drawn, and the sections filled, but every time I looked at the whole picture, the patterns changed. I would retrace the patterns then, one stroke at a time, again enjoying each repetition and realizing that if I could just enjoy the process, it didn't matter so long as I was filling in that section again. Thinking about Zentangle and tangling had become a constant in an ever-changing world for Mom and me. We had no eraser, and there were no mistakes. The border couldn't hold us. We went outside the lines, we took chances, and there were many tangulations. There was total absorption into what was happening.

My mother died at the end of those sixteen months. There is no certain time limit to Alzheimer's conclusion, and though she had suffered with it for years before beginning our sixteen months' journey in the Memory Care Facility, it is those last months that I think of as the time of tangles: her brain's, our lives', and my tiles.

In the "Zentangle Primer," Rick and Maria write as one of the characteristics of the Zentangle Method and Artform the following:

No Regrets. "Even if a tile does not turn out just as you expected at that moment, there is always another tile, another day, another stroke. But don't throw that tile away! Keep it so that you can look at it later with a fresh perspective. You will often see something to appreciate that you missed before, discover something you might add or get inspiration for your next tile."

There is a very beautiful work of art that developed in those sixteen months. When I hold it up now at arm's length, I can appreciate its total beauty. It still changes sometimes, and, of course, I can see both the sadness and joy in it depending on which way I turn it. I acknowledge and celebrate my creative role in all of it now, and I celebrate the way that I was able to let go of Mom, piece by piece, and still appreciate the new patterns and dimensions that she brought to the artwork. Certainly, sometimes I felt like I couldn't do it, the same way that before Zentangle, I didn't think I could draw or appreciate my own art. Yet now, I am able to ask myself the same question that Rick and Maria wrote under the title of Empowerment. "What else do you know that you can't do?"

Through my Zentangle practice, I have discovered an even more beautiful world than I already knew existed. I am certain as I nurture the younger members of my family, and as I reference and remember this "artwork" that Mom and I constructed together, that I will make even more beautiful art using the basics of life learned through the Zentangle Method of drawing.

My Mama is not here with me. I lost her to Alzheimer's Disease, and found her and lost her and lost her, until there was nothing to be found. I am left alone with our final tile. Any additions will have to be my own now. As time changes my reflections, I am sure that I will add some shading and smooth out some of the darker areas of graphite. Alzheimer's Disease is a horrible and brutal, ugly, and destructive, tangling of despair. I searched for the beauty amongst the pain and somehow found comfort and peace, relaxation and healing, in a 3 h X 3 h tile of beautiful paper with the flow of ink on my work of art that said, "I will see you tomorrow. Love, Katrina." I no longer question the power to heal of the Zentangle Method of Drawing. I expect it.

Katrina Thiebaut