

"The Long Hello"

By Cathie Borrie



How is your book, *The Long Hello*, different than all the other books on Alzheimer's out there?

The title gives it away! During seven years of caregiving, I learned from my mother that there was inside her an invincible and enduring spirit and it was up to me to say *hello* to the totality of her experience, rather than goodbye. It is hopeful, very honest and shows how communicating with someone with Alzheimer's in *their* language or universe, is the only way to go. Of course, I failed at this frequently but once I understood, I was to follow my mother's lead, life got much better—for both of us!

What motivated you to write such a book, in this format, which is unusual for a work of non-fiction?

I wrote the book because I could not believe the things she was saying. Her voice, which I recorded, was full of humor, insight and an astonishing poetic sensibility. I was expecting an "empty shell" but realized if I really listened and followed her lead, there was a place in the many moments of despair and heartbreak for us to continue to

connect. Even in the end, when she did not know me or could not speak, we could meet over music, touch, singing, humming and love—*always* love. I tried to read books about Alzheimer's and caregiving but they depressed me too much. I wanted to read about hope paired with a brutal honesty and intimacy, and when I found it in my own experience, I was determined to share this with others.

Did your nursing background help you in caring for your mother?

While I may have been a little better able to cope with some of the physical caregiving, I think it made me more afraid. I knew what could go wrong if she needed medical care and it also made me more isolated as people assumed I could cope with anything.

Was being a writer with the ability to document the experience—a form of therapy—useful to you?

I am not sure it was a form of therapy. I am still thinking about this. I do know that trying to tell this Alzheimer's story, and all the other stories that went into the memoir (*The Long Hello*), with the right paragraphs, sentences and words, was deeply pleasurable. My focus was in trying to tell the story, a number of stories, in as beautiful a way—lyrically and poetically—as I could.

Had you intended on writing at some point in your life?

Yes. But if my mother had not

become sick, I never would have written these works. I had wanted to write all my life but being a child of the 70's I was addicted on a career (*careers*, as it turns out). In the end, the work may be centered on the Alzheimer's years but it also addresses my childhood years and themes of divorce, mother-daughter relationships, the loss of a sibling, and the power of memories to provide sustenance and respite during difficult times.



Finally, would you recommend to others that they document—either in writing or using other recording methods—their patients' or relations' experiences regardless of whether they are seemingly nonsensical? Perhaps as therapy for themselves or to discover deeper messages as you did?

Yes. Recording and documenting our conversations gave me something to do during the long and mostly solitary hours of caregiving and it really perked up my mother, for after all, who would not want to feel important enough to be recorded? As for "nonsensical," I don't ever expect to be clever enough to say some of the things my mother said! Despite the terribly difficult times, when she had Alzheimer's, she was the most interesting person I had ever known.

Cathie Borrie is an author, speaker and tireless advocate for those with Alzheimer's and their caregivers. She is also the author of Looking Into Your Voice—the poetic and eccentric realities of Alzheimer's. www.cathieborrie.com.