

Section Editor
Anne W. McCammon,
MD, FAAN

Recognition

Ludwig Gutmann, MD

Correspondence & reprint
requests to Dr. Gutmann:
lgutmann@wvu.edu

The Victorian house seemed out of place in the shadow of the modern brick and glass medical center complex. The mansion's original straw-colored bricks had faded into pale yellow, their luster long ago washed away by weather and time. A rusting complex of stairs hung loosely on one side—the afterthought of a long-forgotten fire marshal. As if the patients housed there would ever be able to use it in the event of a disaster, I thought each time I walked over to visit my mother.

Mom had lived at Sundale in Morgantown for almost a year—ever since she'd been evicted from Milwaukee's Astor Hotel, having made a confused fuss about a mysterious stranger visiting her apartment in the middle of the night. Her memory had been slowly failing during the past few years but she managed all her activities of daily living with frequent visits from helpful family members.

My brother, Frank, who lived near the hotel, had flown with her to Morgantown. He had supervised end-of-life care for our father, who had died a few years before, and we decided I would do the same for Mom when her turn came for a nursing home. Before he left for his home in Milwaukee, Frank promised her he'd be back soon to Morgantown to visit.

Mom and Dad had lived in this country most of their lives. It was now 50 years since we four had emigrated from Germany. The road traveled by immigrants is invariably challenging—rough, full of obstacles, and often unfriendly—but our parents had managed it well. During those early years, owning and running a chicken farm in New Jersey, their energies were centered on the family's survival and my brother's and my education—always our mother's paramount concern. Money was tight, but there were always books, music lessons, sports, concerts, and museum trips for us. We were the focus of Mom's attention and she let us know that we were the two most important people in her life.

After I finished college and went off to medical school, Frank and I were rarely home at the same time. During our parallel careers, we were at different universities as undergraduates, medical students, res-

idents, and, later, as faculty. When we did manage to visit at the same time, it was always a special occasion for Mom.

Spending the last 10 years of her life in Sundale Nursing Home had not been in her plans. Frank and I had heard Mom's stories ever since we were boys, especially about her girlhood years in a Waisenhaus—an orphanage for girls—in Germany. Her mother had died when she was 6 years old and she was sent there by her stepmother. It wasn't until years later that she told me that her mother had committed suicide. What a complicated situation—the loss of a mother by suicide and her replacement by a stepmother who had no use for the small girl—she grew up with powerful feelings of rejection.

Her memory of being placed away from home was fresh. In fact, all her stories of her life and of distant relatives and friends long gone, as well as anecdotes and aphorisms, remained clear in her mind.

"I spent most of my childhood growing up in an orphanage and I don't want to spend my last years in a nursing home," she had said over and over again. She seemed serious when she said it, but she tempered that comment with a laugh, "I know you boys, the first chance you get ..." shaking her finger at us.

She had been well treated in the orphanage and came away with lifelong friends. It was being sent away from home, away from her father and brothers as a young girl, that was the bad memory. A nursing home at the end of her life never seemed an idea that really concerned her deeply, since she could joke about it. After all, she was a survivor.

The day after she was settled in Sundale, my son and I went to see her. She greeted us with a smile and to my intense relief and surprise she immediately pronounced the nursing home outstanding. "This is such a wonderful hotel," she said. She had enjoyed living at the Astor Hotel and Sundale seemed to compare favorably. Rich and I smiled.

She was even more excited when we visited the next day. "I can't imagine how you ever found this place for me to live," she continued. "My room faces the ocean and I can hear the surf all night long. You

Listen to Dr. Gutmann read this story (audio file on www.neurology.org).

know how much I always loved the ocean and putting me so close to it was very thoughtful.”

At first I was perplexed but after listening carefully I understood. “I think it’s the breeze rustling the leaves outside,” I whispered to my son, smiling at our good fortune.

She continued, “And the food in the restaurant is so good, they must have a gourmet chef. I’m going to lunch right now. Come join me.”

Lunch was a small hamburger and some wilted string beans served on a plastic plate. It was typical nursing home food. During the meal another patient was yelling, refusing to eat. Mom just laughed, “Just look at that old biddy, she was disruptive last night too. It’s best to ignore her.”

“I can’t believe how much she likes it here,” Rich said. “It’s not just that the building is old—the other patients are so infirm and frail. As Grandma says, they’re old biddies.”

I thought back to all the conversations I had over the years with family members of patients. “It’s not what you and I see that matters,” I said. “It’s what Grandma sees that is her reality. Her observations are the ones that count.”

It took a year but Frank finally came from Milwaukee for his first visit. I wondered if Mom would remember how long it had been since she had seen him.

We walked between the tightly parked cars in front of the towering hospital toward the aging yellow building. I knew this would be another special occasion for her—having both of her sons visiting at the same time. Frank was worried. “She’s going to be all over me for taking a year to visit her,” he said.

“I doubt it,” I laughed. “That’s my exclusive doghouse.” She’d never forgiven me for failing to make a one-hour trip to Philadelphia to see her when she was at Temple University Hospital years before. I’d been an undergraduate at Princeton and she was having a hemorrhoidectomy, painful but not life-threatening. Years later I realized I had let her down just as her father did when he placed her in the orphanage.

“I don’t know,” Frank said, as we climbed up the well-worn staircase to the second floor, “she’s going to figure it out—that it’s taken me so long to come.”

I smiled. “You’ll see how wrong you are.” I knew the speech we would get, having heard it so many times.

Mom sat half dozing in a frayed overstuffed chair as we entered the large day room, bright sunlight streaming through the large glass windows. An astonished look of delight spread across her face—a huge smile pushing her wrinkles aside. She straightened up, her hair a crown of unruly graying curls.

“Well, well, well,” she began slowly. I relaxed: Frank was safe. It would be the usual. “So, you finally found some time for your mother,” she said, looking directly at me. She always smiled when she said it and sometimes I wondered if it just wasn’t a game for her. But she knew today was different—she had both of her boys together. Her smile broadened as she beamed at Frank and then she looked back at me with a mock stern expression, “You’re not like your brother, who comes to see me every day.”

Frank chortled like a boy stealing a cookie and not being caught. Mom looked perplexed for a moment, before asking, “I said something wrong, didn’t I?”

“Not really,” I gave her my usual answer. “I’ll try to do better.” As always, I was forgiven.

Neurology[®]

Recognition

Ludwig Gutmann

Neurology 2012;78;148-149

DOI 10.1212/WNL.0b013e31823efc2e

This information is current as of January 9, 2012

Updated Information & Services	including high resolution figures, can be found at: http://n.neurology.org/content/78/2/148.full
Supplementary Material	Supplementary material can be found at: http://n.neurology.org/content/suppl/2012/01/07/78.2.148.DC1
Subspecialty Collections	This article, along with others on similar topics, appears in the following collection(s): All Cognitive Disorders/Dementia http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/all_cognitive_disorders_dementia Alzheimer's disease http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/alzheimers_disease Cognitive aging http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/cognitive_aging Dementia aphasia http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/dementia_aphasia Memory http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/memory
Permissions & Licensing	Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at: http://www.neurology.org/about/about_the_journal#permissions
Reprints	Information about ordering reprints can be found online: http://n.neurology.org/subscribers/advertise

Neurology® is the official journal of the American Academy of Neurology. Published continuously since 1951, it is now a weekly with 48 issues per year. Copyright © 2012 by AAN Enterprises, Inc.. All rights reserved. Print ISSN: 0028-3878. Online ISSN: 1526-632X.

