

What Oba-Chan Taught Me

The persistent rhythm of the wiper furnished the silence in the car. My mind wandered to the same question that had occupied my mind throughout the week. Facing my mother, I finally asked her why grandma is acting so different. My question caught her unexpectedly, making her hesitate to find the right words for a second. Her response turned my fear into a reality: my grandmother is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. While this revelation opened my journey of struggles, it also opened a journey of finding a true communication.

My grandmother, Oba-Chan, was my mentor throughout my childhood. She epitomized what it meant to be a traditional Japanese woman. Through her actions, she taught me to be a good samaritan: always respect everyone and help others in need. The memory of her kind-hearted self, always welcoming everyone with a warm embrace, is imprinted on my heart. While being traditional is often conceptualized as being conservative, Oba-Chan was fierce and progressive. Experiencing the Second World War as a child and losing her daughter and husband in early years, she underwent so many struggles in her life, yet she stood tall. She passed on her way of living through teaching me to never let others, or my fears, stop me from achieving my goals. She believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself— that I can be whatever I desire to be.

In the years after the revelation in the car, it seemed that the seasons became limited to a bleak and unforgiving winter. Just as the color of the leaves faded away, her condition deteriorated as the days went by. When she couldn't remember the way to the park we visited all the time, when she stopped making her famous strawberry jam... slowly her illness took away the parts that defined who she was. Seeing my family member slowly detaching from the rest of the world, I was immersed in despair. However, one day, my anger at the ruthless disease altered into a

resentment towards grandma herself. I threw my distress to her, asking why can't she remember the simplest things anymore. Finding a demarcation, I slowly distanced away from her.

The first time Oba-Chan did not recognize me, I faced an overwhelming devastation. The reality never seems to get easier; this illness made me grieve the loss of a person who is still here. Having been asked for my name by the person who had engulfed me with love throughout my life, I finally became aware of the magnitude of the illness. I realized how ignorant I was for wasting so many days in sorrow, when I could have spent the time meaningfully, while her memory of me was still present.

The research conducted by Alzheimer's Disease International disclosed that someone in the world is diagnosed with dementia every three seconds, with approximately fifty million people battling this disease today. Nonetheless, despite the normality of this illness, no cure has been developed yet. While struggling with the illness, there comes a moment when the families of the patients feel their loved ones drifting worlds away. However, especially during those moments of hopelessness, we have to try our best to bring back the lost connections.

A couple of months after Oba-Chan stopped recognizing me, I found a stack of blank flashcards in her drawers. As I skimmed through the cards, I noticed one that was filled with Oba-Chan's handwriting. Written were my name, my age, and my date of birth. I believe she wrote this when she was starting to lose her memory, to hold onto her recollection of me as long as she could. Through spending time with Oba-Chan, I now understand that to have true communication, we must cherish every interaction we have with gratitude and kindness. As my grandma's efforts to remember show, we can never cease our efforts to understand others even when we face differences and difficulties with them. I promised myself never to give up on Oba-Chan and

continue to love her even if she doesn't remember who I am anymore. Just as she always loved me with her warmth, I will now give her the embrace she once gave me. [697 words]