

A Quality Meal

By Dallas Ducar (CNL 2017)

Snow slowly began to rise along the windowsill. Outside, the frozen flag lapped against the frigid pole, the rope clanged against it in the wintry winds. My gaze turned inward, looking away from the harsh cold and back towards Ms. Morris. Each day I would visit, helping her, with daily activities ranging from eating a meal to brushing her teeth, occasionally if we were lucky, we would have time for bingo. Life was not always easy for a 97 year old patient with dementia, but I strove to make it more comfortable. As I sat with her, a new resident approached the table, somewhat timid and anxious. Taking the opportunity to introduce myself, I asked her what her name was, where she was from, and how she liked her new room at the assisted living facility.

"T-the name's Nancy. And the place, it's t-terrible," she muttered. "I hate the food, nothing tastes good, and I-I am away from my family and friends. I d-don't need to be in this place -- there's nothing wrong with my memory." I nodded, caught off guard. "Y-you should try some of this -- it's t-terrible. Who serves f-fish f-for breakfast?" While she got the dish right she was wrong about the time, it was about 5:00 PM. I didn't bother to correct her. I looked back at Ms. Morris and saw that she was happily enjoying her steamed broccoli. "Perfect, I thought -- I can spend some time with this new resident."

"Why don't you try some fish Nancy?" I asked. "F-fish is t-terrible here. I hate it!" she spat back, loud and clear. I lowered my own voice, attempting to calm her. "Well what about your corn? Or potatoes?" I inquired. "Even worse -- c-cold and no t-taste." Who was I to try to convince her? Uprooted at the age of 95, told to live in a new place, eat prearranged meals on a prearranged schedule, I'd be upset too. "What about a sip of water Nancy?" I asked, almost begging her now. "Gross -- the water is t-terrible," she said. I nodded again, unsure of what to say now. The personal care assistant (PCA) walked by in a hurry, per usual. I stood up and rushed over, "Has Nancy eaten anything since she first arrived?" "Nothing," she replied. "We've been too busy to sit and try to get her to eat. We have others who can't even feed themselves." The PCA was expressing a very real problem, most assisted living facilities are understaffed and overworked, with a growing older population, this situation was becoming more common by the day.

Looking back towards Nancy, I reflected on how I could help. I had recently learned of an exercise, 'Mindful Eating' which could be perfect for this moment. Returning to the table with newfound hope and two bowls of warm mashed potatoes, I sat alongside Nancy with a wide-eyed grin. "Nancy!" I exclaimed, "I forgot to tell you about a new activity I heard about -- it can change how the food tastes!" She perked up, a curious look etched on her face. "Anything to c-change the way t-this crap tastes," she smirked. I chuckled, this was an opening -- her first smile today. "Perfect!" I said, "Just repeat after me."

I paused and inhaled deeply, followed by a strong exhalation. She followed suit. We repeated this over and over again, "deep cleansing breaths," I repeated. "What's this gotta do with food?" She retorted. "Deep cleansing breaths," I repeated. She begrudgingly nodded and continued to repeat after me. After a couple additional breaths I paused and looked her in the eyes.

"Now, let's tune in Nancy – are you feeling hungry?" I asked. "I'm s-starving," she replied. "Well how insightful that you noticed this," I replied. "Now, let's focus on the smell of our potatoes, how do they smell?" She brought her nose close to the bowl and inhaled deeply. "W-well not too bad," she shrugged. "And how do they feel?" Nancy cupped her hands around the bowl, then began to hold her hand above the potatoes, feeling the rising steam, "they're pretty warm, that's nice." I nodded, "yes mine too – and what else do you notice?"

Nancy paused, there was a slightly calmer air about her now. She closed her eyes and a smile overcame her face. "My mother used to make potatoes like this when I was a girl." A tear rolled down her cheek, I offered her a napkin. "T-thank you dear," she sniffed as she accepted the napkin and dried her tears. "I completely forgot about that. My mother. The potatoes. It was my favorite. She made it for me all the time." I smiled and rested my hand on Nancy's quivering shoulder. She turned to the small bowl before her, picked up her spoon, and with a slight grin asked, "Is it time to taste it now?"

I was astonished. While I had expected Nancy to go along with the practice, I did not think she would attempt to eat her own food. "Eat when you are ready," I said, "And remember to notice anything that comes to mind, no judgment." Nancy nodded and we both took our first bite of the mashed potatoes. Wide-eyed, Nancy sat up, spoon in hand, "T-that is t-the best food I have ever h-had here," she said in amazement. She quickly took another bite, and another, until the bowl was completely clean.

Nancy and I continued trying new foods. Each dish became a new "tasty experiment," I would heat it up, we would try a couple bites, and discuss what we noticed. "I've n-never had such a delicious meal!" she exclaimed by the end of the dinner. "W-who would have thought? P-potatoes and c-corn for breakfast!" We both chuckled, the PCA's were staggered, "She never does this," one of them said. "We just needed a little more time," I replied. Nancy reached out and held my hand, "We have now," she replied with a smile.

It was time to leave and I could not have felt more accomplished. Nancy was an inspiration and I was looking forward to future days filled with "mindful eating" and "tasty experiments." I said goodbye to Ms. Morris and then turned to Nancy, thanking her for taking the time to try something new. Slowly, Nancy turned to me and said, "N-no love, t-thank you for a t-true quality meal." I hugged her, waved goodbye, and strolled out the door.

The next day I returned, eager to greet my new friend and enjoy another gustatory adventure. Entering the dining room I scanned for Nancy, but she was nowhere to be seen. "She must be in her room," I thought as I sauntered down the hall. I peeked into her open room, the bed was empty. Walking back to the dining room I inquired with the PCA, "Did Nancy go out to eat with her family?" She turned to me with a heavy look, "Ms. Edwards passed last night in her sleep." Sorrow rippled throughout every fabric of my being, my heart sunk deeply. The PCA placed her hand on my shoulder, "After you left she kept talking about her quality meal and her mother's potatoes. She passed peacefully."

Sulking I rejoined Ms. Morris, filled with sadness. She looked at me with a concerned look and nudged her bowl of warm mashed potatoes towards me. "Remember," she said, "We still have now." I smiled, remembering Nancy's words.

So often in life we seek quantity over quality. We are told to work more so that we can buy more so that we may do more. Even health care has forgotten how vital these last moments can be, oftentimes championing longevity as the ultimate goal. I only knew Nancy for one hour, I joined her for one quality meal, and she taught me more than I have ever learned in any lecture or textbook.

Before I joined Nancy for our quality meal I knew one thing was certain, that this will all end one day. No matter how much we strive for, we are beings necessarily limited in time and space.

After meeting Nancy, I am now certain of this simple truth: "We still have now."