

An interview with Elinor Fuchs, author of “Making an Exit: A Mother-Daughter Drama with Alzheimer’s, Machine Tools, and Laughter”

Elinor Fuchs will be the keynote speaker at the 18th Annual Chapter Gathering, Wednesday, September 28th, 2005 at The Graduate Center, CUNY, 365 5th Avenue at 34th Street. Reception at 5 pm, program at 6 pm. To register, please call 212-983-6906 x 223.

We asked Elinor Fuchs to respond to a few questions about her experiences caring for her mother, her life in theater and writing a book.

QU: You teach theater and drama at Yale University and all of your other books have been about the theater. What led you to write a personal memoir?

EF: My mother, Lil, lived with Alzheimer’s for ten years, probably longer. That decade was one of the most intense periods of my life. In difficult times I have always given myself ease and solace through the act of writing. I kept a journal in that time that later seemed to “want” to become a book.

I think a more theatrical connection actually led me to write “Making an Exit.” The book has a theatrical title and is filled with little dialogues, conversations between me and my mother. She had always been a highly verbal person, was a debater in high school and used that skill effectively as the president of an export business she founded in Washington D.C., which sold machine tools, automotive parts, and paramilitary equipment to foreign governments all across the globe. (Hard to believe a woman born before the first World War was actually in this line of work)

Her delight in expressing herself continued well into Alzheimer’s, but her word recall and logical syntax broke down. Perhaps because of my theater training, I chose not to see her as “ill” or “not making sense,” but as a word artist, a zany poet speaking a fragmented, creative language. Just for fun and to give us something to do together, I taped many of these conversations. Later they became the living thread of the book.

QU: From those ten long years of caretaking, is there any moment that stands out as especially significant in your memory?

EF: Oh, many! While the memory of the person we care for shrinks, we caretakers tend almost to suffer from a hyperactive, swollen, memory. We are remembering for two, so to speak, both the past and an overwhelming number of details on an ongoing, daily basis. There

was an astonishing moment that occurred sometime during year seven. It suggested a startling link between Alzheimer’s and the theater.

Lil and I were walking down the hallway of her apartment building, headed for the elevator, when she turned to me and in that authoritative “CEO” voice of hers, asked me, “Is this a game, a play, or reality?” When I asked her, “You mean, right here, right now?” she added another possibility: Perhaps this was a dream?

I was floored to realize she was not only suffering the disorientation of Alzheimer’s, but at the same time was able

to reflect on the nature of that very disorientation! It was as if she might actually sort it all out if only she knew for sure whether she was caught inside a play or a dream, or living her own real life. This brief insight into her thinking, into her sense of living in simultaneous orders of experience, may say something about the subjective experience of Alzheimer’s that we are rarely able to glimpse.

QU: Could you name the most important thing you learned from your experience with Alzheimer’s?

EF: Even within the inexorable decline of Alzheimer’s, there is—or was for my mother and me—the possibility of human growth and change right up to the end. My mother was not a cold person, but she never used the language of life with me as a child or an adult. I don’t think she believed that love or personal intimacy of any kind were reliable. They had let her down. Suddenly, in the later years of Alzheimer’s, “I love you” were the words that came to her lips more easily than any others. I, too, loved her more than had been possible in our earlier, somewhat estranged days.

So what I learned was that we should never give up on human growth. At the beginning of those ten years with Alzheimer’s, a disease which loomed for me as the very opposite of positive change, I would never have believed that my mother could undergo such a transformation. Though I am sorry that my mother’s later years were cut off in worldly terms, for myself I can’t regret undergoing the pain of an experience that ended so meaningfully.

