

Unexpected Brilliance: What the Alzheimer's Mind Can Teach Us

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As babies we all lived in a world of sensation, gradually bringing the light waves, sounds, tastes, smells and touch together in various combinations to create perceptions. These perceptions became so solid during childhood that most of us slowly lost touch with our baby mind. However, some people still spend a great deal of time living on this threshold, gliding between sensation and perception.

If we could re-learn to travel this threshold, we would encounter an unexpected level of brilliance in the process. Artists, inventors, innovative scientific researchers, therapists, parents who attune especially well to their babies and toddlers all travel along this threshold frequently, nourishing their creative energies.

In my quest to follow my late husband's 12 year journey through Alzheimer's disease, I discovered that individuals with Alzheimer's were traveling along the same numinous threshold between pure sensation and perception. The key difference was that they didn't have a choice and it was impacting every aspect of their daily life. The more we can understand the changes they are going through, the better we can relate to them and reduce their confusion and frustration. Here are a few vivid examples of how they experience their world.

My husband was both an artist-illustrator and a rancher. In Colorado, when ranchers gather to talk over pasture issues, from rainfall and irrigation needs to weed control, fencing and grazing strategies, they invariably reach down to grab a few strands of hay or dry grass. As they slowly pool their ideas and observations, their hands go into "twig snap" mode. Thumbs and forefingers bear down on the dry strands, mindlessly snapping them into bits.

One day, after he had moved into a nearby nursing home, I brought him several sheets of fine quality art paper and some colored pencils. He could no longer create images, but that day he enjoyed making sweeping arcs of color on the paper. When he stopped, he continued holding onto one of the pencils. Soon he gripped it firmly between his thumbs and forefingers as if trying to break it. My first thought was that he didn't like the pencil, but then I realized that, to him, it no longer was the percept of 'pencil' with its function of drawing and creating color. It had become the sensation of 'twigness' and he was in 'twig snap' mode.

Another time, we were sitting at a table when he reached over to pick up a glass of juice and drank from it. Clearly, it was a percept with a function that he understood. He held onto it for a while after it was empty and then raised his other hand and began twisting. It was no longer a glass, but simply a cylindrical sensation in his hand. The roundness had called forth the motor response of unscrewing.

Eventually, processing percepts became much more infrequent. When I came to visit, he rarely recognized me by sight. However, if I sat quietly next to him for a while, he would usually pick up the *sensation* of my presence and turn to greet me. It had felt familiar so he made the effort to bring my presence into focus.

The ears undergo the same deconstruction process as the eyes. I watched members of the Alzheimer's unit experience progressive difficulty pulling sound signals out of the surrounding noise. If live musicians were playing for them, they could attend to the music fairly well. Some were clearly following the music, while others were most likely picking up on the sensations of the performers'

bodies as they played. If recorded music was played for them, though, they were rarely engaged. Even TV screenings of familiar musicals like *The Sound of Music* failed to register.

However, I discovered that if I let them wear wireless headphones that I'd linked into the TV, their attention would stay fixed on the screen, and they thoroughly enjoyed the familiar film. Because the headphones were directly against their ears, they were taking in the sounds by bone conduction, receiving the vibratory sensations as well as the melodies. This freed them to slide from perception to sensation and back without missing a beat!

In the later stages of Alzheimer's, individuals struggle to remember their lives and identities. On most days their minds seem clouded over, but once in a while the sun comes through for a while. It happened dramatically for my husband the day he stumbled on a copy of a children's book he had illustrated. He sat looking at all the drawings for nearly 45 minutes, quietly repeating to himself "I did this." There was no remorse, none of the poignancy we might feel in that moment, just a brief period of lucidity he was savoring.

These lucid times could also come as mere moments, like this incident from my book, *Original Mind*:

"Hit the ditch!" she warned repetitively. I was volunteering in an Alzheimer's unit at a local nursing home, and the speaker was a World War II veteran. One evening, I sat beside her trying to take in the emotion behind her rhythmic refrain. I felt the urgency of the wartime setting mounting, and slipped a comment in between the refrains.

"That must have been *so* hard!" She abruptly stopped her calls, looked me straight in the eyes, and slowly said, "You have no idea!" She soon returned to her chant state, but for a few moments we were connected.

While those with Alzheimer's have little control over their minds' fluctuations across the sensation to perception threshold, our efforts to meet them can teach us how to cross this threshold by choice. It becomes a gift for all of our caregiving, not just our engagement with Alzheimer's folks. It heightens our sensitivity to nature, deepens our intuition, and even allows us to enter the baby's wondrous world.

You can learn more about the science behind this threshold and the practices that can help you travel it with ease in the early chapters of my book, [Original Mind: Uncovering your Natural Brilliance](#).



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Brief bio: Dee Joy Coulter is a nationally recognized neuroscience educator and public speaker with a master's degree in special education from the University of Michigan and a doctorate in neurological studies and holistic education from the University of Northern Colorado. In addition to 14 years as a special education teacher and program director, she served on the faculty of Naropa University for 20 years.