How Between 2 Chairs Meets Advanced Scholarship and Published Work Standards

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
Alternate Professor Essay  
Valerie Rae Smith

It is my pleasure to submit my published play, *Between 2 Chairs*, and the following Alternate Professor Essay in order to illuminate some of my perspectives on the intersections between my personal faith and my work as a theatre artist. This essay describes how *Between 2 Chairs* meets the college’s expectations for advanced scholarship and published work, provides a context for the work, and highlights distinctive features of my work as a Christian and a theatre artist.

**How *Between 2 Chairs* Meets Advanced Scholarship and Published Work Standards**

I wrote, directed, performed and published *Between 2 Chairs*, a play about memory development and memory loss between 2007 and 2009. This creative work constitutes advanced scholarship because it is open to critical evaluation and interpretation. Dissemination of the work was achieved in several ways:

1. Initial presentation at the internationally regarded Touchstone Theatre Ensemble. The play was workshopped with members of the ensemble during my sabbatical in the spring of 2007. The play was presented at Touchstone to a public audience in the summer of 2007. Each performance was followed by a talk-back with me and a panel of local experts on Alzheimer’s care.
2. The play was presented at Taylor University in April of 2008 and launched a weekend dedicated to Alzheimer's research and caregiving with several local and national experts in the field providing workshops and seminars.

3. The play was presented at Messiah College in May of 2008 and followed by a public talk-back with local experts on Alzheimer's care.

4. The play was presented at the Brick Church in Manhattan in May of 2008 as part of a weekend devoted to exploring the relationship between Christian faith and Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

5. The play was published by the Johns Hopkins Memory Bulletin in the summer of 2008 and thereby disseminated to a national audience of medical practitioners and lay individuals involved in Alzheimer's care.

6. I revised the play and worked with a professional director in the spring of 2009. This revision was funded in part by an internal grant from Messiah College.

7. I was selected among other national solo artists to perform Between 2 Chairs at Open Stage of Harrisburg as part of their Flying Solo Festival in June of 2009. Each performance was followed by a public talk-back with the audience.

8. The play was critically examined by theatre professionals when I presented an assessment of the work at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in New York City in August of 2009.
About the Play

The play’s title comes from the German idiom “zwischen den Stühlen sitzen” (literally, “to sit between the chairs”). The idiom is often used to express frustration and sometimes hopelessness over being caught between two sides of a personal or cultural difficulty. In this way Between 2 Chairs is both a theatrical celebration of memory and a vexed look at Alzheimer’s disease. “I am between two chairs. Between remembering and forgetting. Between truth and fiction. Between faith and doubt. Between the development of my son’s memories and the loss of my father’s.” ¹ Early in the devising process I thought this play would be a way to use my art to say goodbye to my father who now lives in the later stages of Alzheimer’s. The process of researching, writing and playing this piece, however, has made that goodbye impossible. Shortly after his diagnosis my father asked me not to forget: “remember who I was,” he pleaded. The play allowed me to discover that as long as I remember who my father was he continues to live on in me and in the developing memories of my son. But there is another father, one who no longer remembers me as his daughter, a very different man who is still worth knowing. Somehow, I am building new memories with this new father, memories that are sometimes unspeakably horrible as well as memories that offer great joy. The process of creation demanded that I be willing to enter my father’s world rather than force him to remain in mine.

¹ Between 2 Chairs.
As the daughter of a man who is losing his memories and the mother of a child who is developing his own I cannot help but watch these two individuals as they pass one another, each on their own journey. These seemingly conflicting experiences create the structure of the play as I go back and forth between interactions with my son and interactions with my father. I am grateful for what God has chosen to teach me from this unique vantage point. The play acknowledges the sorrow that comes with this disease, but it also embraces the way in which Christianity offers a counterintuitive approach to the experience. In the play, as in real life, I play a woman who doesn’t know what to do with a father who is physically present but no longer recognizes me as his daughter. Simply put, performing Between 2 Chairs is what I do to remember my father for myself and for my son. Very early on in the development of the play the words: “Do this in remembrance of me” would hang in my thoughts. I didn’t know why these words kept coming to mind. I didn’t see my father as a Christ figure. Nevertheless, the words etched into the Lord’s Table that dominated the front of the church where I grew up wouldn’t leave me alone. I was raised in a Plymouth Brethren congregation where the Lord’s Supper was celebrated every Sunday, no exceptions. Remembering was central to my life as a young Christian. Some of my most treasured memories are of those contemplative services where we spent an hour re-membering Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection. It is the Lord’s Supper that ultimately taught me how to remember my earthly father. Yes, there is the man who lives on this earth
like a tortured ghost, but there is also the hope of a man who will live in eternity with Christ. Christ’s command to “do this in remembrance of me” continues to serve as a rich metaphor for my own act of remembrance in Between 2 Chairs and becomes a central motif in the play.

Creating Community Through Theatre

Between 2 Chairs is an autobiographical, solo piece of theatre. It would be easy to construe this as a very singular investigation of the spirituality of memory. But theatre is about community and this piece of theatre is about bringing people together to consider our relationship to memory as individuals and as a community. As I state in the author’s note to the play, “although this play is capable of standing on its own as a single piece of theatre, it is intended to be a part of a larger conversation. Between 2 Chairs seeks to create a community among those who live with memory loss as well as those who live with and/or care for people with memory loss.” Performances are followed by a talk-back with the author as well as other community members affected by Alzheimer’s disease. It is extremely rewarding to work together with a local theatre to create an “experience” rather than a show. Taylor University and The Brick Church in Manhattan both orchestrated weekends that considered the relationship between Alzheimer’s disease and Christian faith using Between 2 Chairs to launch that discussion. The Alzheimer’s Association has also been involved in talk-backs and provided
audience members with resources in the local community. This is what *Between 2 Chairs* is all about.

The Relationship Between Christian Faith and Theatre Art

This desire to create community is central to my vision for theatre which is grounded in my understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. I believe that we are created in God’s image and thus capable of participating in the act of creation. We can use our God-given ability to create for any purpose. We have the capacity to devise theatrical works that celebrate our humanity as well as works that wallow in our depravity. I have chosen to create and direct works that not only look authentically at the dark side of the human condition, but also give evidence of the hope that is in me through Christ.²

Madeleine L’Engle tells us that as human beings created in this mysterious image we can affirm our Creator through the use of our own creative capacities: A play, a symphony, a choir “enlarges us, and we, too, want to make our own cry of affirmation to the power of creation behind the universe.”³ L’Engle even suggests that "unless we

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² I Peter 3:15.

are creators we are not fully alive." L’Engle also reminds us that we partner with God in our creative endeavors.  

Theatre is a celebration as well as an investigation of what it means to be created in the image of God. Actors and spectators inhale and exhale in real-time, and for a brief shared moment we experience the human spirit in all its glory and pain. Artists of Christian faith have the profound commission to illuminate this visible world but also to imagine the invisible world that is God’s kingdom. It is these two worlds, the visible and the invisible, that I am compelled to illuminate as a theatre artist.

Through Hamlet Shakespeare suggested that the theatre is a living, breathing mirror of life that shows “virtue her own feature, scorn her own image.” The arts transport us to a world of make-believe where we discover our own reflections. You could say that theatre artists are in the business of telling lies in order to tell truths; an interesting business for the followers of Christ. But L’Engle reassures me when she reminds us that Jesus was a God who told stories and parables. “Stories are able to help us become more whole, to become Named. And Naming is one of the triumphs behind

5. Madeleine L’Enlge, Walking on Water, 44.

all arts, to give a name to the cosmos despite all the chaos.” Theatre can transport us back to a childlike faith where the power of imagination makes anything possible. “An artist at work is in a condition of complete and total faith” says L’Engle. As artists we invite our audiences to take leaps of faith, to suspend disbelief, in order to illuminate our place in God’s universe. As a theatre educator I remind my students that Christians can often be seduced by consumer-oriented theatre. If we check our faith at the stage door we miss the best of what theatre can be. I agree with Matthew Fox when he writes that “art without spirituality is cynical, manipulative, commercial, and consumer oriented, pessimistic, ego centered, competitive, tired, afraid to die because it has not lived, fame seeking, exclusive, elitist, expensive, anthropocentric, and self-serving . . . .” On the other hand, art with spirituality, explains Fox, is “inclusive, celebrative, joyous, courageous, capable of taking us into grief and beyond, energizing, open to the community in all its diversity, playful, justice oriented, compassionate, honoring of other art worlds, nonsentimental, surprising and therefore spirit-filled, youthful, fresh, and always ‘in the beginning.’ Such art heals.” If I am mindful, my work as a theatre artist can be full of grace. At its very best the practical work of theatre can be an act of


unconditional love to the community. Nicholas Wolterstorff explains that we are 
"placed on the stage of existence by God, there to do God's work of making and 
selecting so as to bring forth something of benefit and delight to other human beings, 
something in acknowledgment of God."\textsuperscript{10} As a Christian and a theatre artist I celebrate 
the fact that God is the source of all my creative efforts and my work is an act of 
worship to God and service to the community.

\textsuperscript{10} Nicholas Wolterstorff. \textit{Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic}. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. 
Between 2 Chairs

A solo performance piece about memory
development, memory loss and faith

By Valerie Rae Smith
4/10/2009

This project is funded in part by the Messiah College Department of Faculty Development.
Author’s Note

The play’s title comes from the German idiom “zwischen den Stühlen sitzen” [literally, “sit between the chairs”]. It is often used to express frustration or even hopelessness over being caught between two sides of a personal or cultural difficulty.

Although this play is capable of standing on its own as an autonomous piece of theatre, it is intended to be a part of a larger conversation. Between 2 Chairs seeks to create a community among those who live with memory loss as well as those who live with and/or care for people with memory loss. Previous performances have been followed by a talk-back with the author as well as other community members affected by Alzheimer’s disease. The Alzheimer’s Association has been involved in these talk-backs and provided audience members with resources in the local community.
Characters

NARRATOR: A woman in her late thirties or early forties. She is part of what is now being called the "sandwich generation." She is caught between a longing for faith and a disposition to doubt.

LETHE: Goddess of forgetfulness. In ancient Greek mythology Lethe is one of the many rivers that flows through Hades. Also called the River of Oblivion, the dead are invited to drink from this river in order to forget about their past lives on earth. In costume she appears as a river.

MNEMOSYNE: Goddess of memory. In ancient Greek mythology Mnemosyne is the personification of memory. She is the daughter of Gaia and Uranus and the mother of the Muses by Zeus. She invented words and language and gave mankind the oral tradition. Both Lethe and Mnemosyne appear in the Chair and the Lost Dance.

DAD: The NARRATOR’s father, who is living with Alzheimer’s, is seen at various stages of the disease. He is a “believer.”

JUDE: A four-year-old boy full of questions, mischief and wonder. He has an innocent and simple faith.

JEAN PIAGET: The Swiss developmental biologist who observes the intellectual capabilities of JUDE. He comments on JUDE’s specific stages of development and their correspondence to advancements in brain growth. Piaget is pure joy as he shares life-giving discoveries. He helps the NARRATOR understand her fears about memory loss. He is the angel of light.

ANN: ANN is a neurologist who works with Alzheimer’s patients and their families. She helps the NARRATOR understand her father’s condition. She represents the need for empirical evidence in order to believe.

DR. ALOIS ALZHEIMER: Although this character is inspired by the man who documented the first case of dementia that later became known as Alzheimer’s disease, the comparison stops here. The character is the disease itself, the fear of memory loss, and the NARRATOR’s perception of a certain
aspect of disease treatment. The character becomes increasingly maniacal and Naziesque. He is death without sentiment. He is the dark angel.

Setting

A screen hangs center stage for projections. Placed on either side are acting cubes with props stored inside. Stage right is a large wooden chair that represents DAD. Stage left is a small wooden chair that represents JUDE. The NARRATOR interacts with the chairs as characters throughout the play. The scenic shifts and costume changes are carried out with music and narration. The action of the play does not pause for these shifts. There is no intermission.
NARRATOR. So, true story. An old lady with Alzheimer's goes to mass. She's agitated throughout the entire service and becomes more and more disturbed as the time for the holy Eucharist approaches. Finally it's her turn to drink the cup. She looks up at the priest and asks, "is that real wine?" And the priest says, "yes, yes it is." "May I hold the cup," she asks. "Yes," answers the priest and he carefully hands the cup to her. She takes the cup, holds it up triumphantly and declares, "Here's to you and here's to me!"

Ok, so I'm not so sure that's funny. How about this?

LETHE.

(A large cloth covers the NARRATOR'S body. Sound cue begins. The music is pastoral, Beethoven's 5th symphony. There is lots of reverb, gongs, thunder, cymbols. NARRATOR begins to move to the music in a very bad imitation of Isadora Duncan's style.)

Come! Drink of the river Lethe and choose to forget. Allow my waters to course through your veins and you will erase all the pains and terrors of your life. Forget all your labors, your earthly creations, your family, the world you once knew. Drink of me and experience emptiness and sweet oblivion! Maniacal laughing Sound cue ends with over-the-top effect.

(NARRATOR exits behind scrim and in silhouette transforms herself from LETHE to MNEMOSYNE.)

MNEMOSYNE. Go not to Lethe! Come drink of me, the river Mnemosyne, and choose to remember. My twin sister, Lethe, speaks only half truths. Drink of the river Lethe and you must be reborn on earth to learn your lessons all over again. Drink of the river Mnemosyne and drink forever from the springs of memory. If you drink of me I will welcome you to the Elysian Fields where you can spend an omniscient eternity!

(Projection of NARRATOR as MNEMOSYNE running through a field.)

NARRATOR.

No!

(Sits.)
That’s not it either. It’s not a choice to remember or to forget. You see, at the moment I’m obsessed with the relationship between memory development and memory loss and I’m struggling to create a piece of theatre about it.

(Move DSL)

Ok, key presupposition: I believe that inside this three pound mass lodged between my ears is a constellation of memories that make up the person I’ve become. But what is memory? How does it work? Why do we remember certain facts, events and experiences and why, why do we forget? I depend on my memory for everything: every class I teach, every meal I cook, every step I take. I fear . . . . Pause. Is memory psychological? Scientific? Philosophical? Is it the trillions of neurons creating traffic patterns in my brain or is memory a part of my soul?

(Thinks about this for a moment.)

Who am I without my memories? Who are you?

Projections of neurons, synapses, circuits. The moment I ask you this question neurons in various regions of your brain begin to connect to each other. A completely unique pattern of connections creates your answer as it comes to you in words and images and sensations. Your memory of who you are, where you’ve come from returns to you in truth and fiction and imagination.

(NARRATOR begins to move toward the DAD chair as the interview plays. She interacts with the chair first using the LETHE cloth to dust off and polish the chair, then moves toward more abstract movement in an attempt to connect with her father physically and emotionally. This moment is all about a father and his daughter.)

Recording plays and excerpts are projected with images of Dad, his childhood home, his sisters, etc.

NARRATOR: What is your full name?

DAD: William James Flower.

NARRATOR: Do you know what today’s date is?

DAD: Oh, I’d have to be guessing but I’d say it’s probably Wednesday.

NARRATOR: Do you know what season this is?

DAD: Well . . . spring time.

NARRATOR: Do you know what state we’re in?

DAD: Pennsylvania.

NARRATOR: Do you know what city?
DAD. [pause] Ah ... no I don’t ... ‘cause it was on a farm.
NARRATOR: Do you know what year this is?
DAD: I don’t . . . I don’t have to write it down anymore.
NARRATOR. Yeah, it doesn’t really matter does it?
[laughter]
DAD: [laughter]
NARRATOR: Do you know how old you are now?
DAD: [pause] Well, I was born in ’36. [pause]
NARRATOR. So you are 70. Do you remember where you were born?
DAD: Well, no [laughs]. It was in Pennsylvania. It was a farm, I think. I couldn’t swear to that.
NARRATOR: What do you remember about your family, growing up, siblings, parents?
DAD: Well, I had four sisters.
NARRATOR: Do you remember their names?
DAD: Well, Theresa was the oldest. She was a nurse. Let’s see. Dorothy would be next, and Margaret the next one. I can’t figure out the last one.
NARRATOR: Helen?
DAD: Oh, yeah, Helen. She’s deceased.
NARRATOR: Do you remember anything in particular about growing up, your childhood? Any particular memories?
DAD: Well, it was probably a different world back then. My parents let me walk to school and it was quite a ways and I got lost one time and I . . . I couldn’t . . . I couldn’t find my way home.
NARRATOR: Did you ever marry anyone?
DAD. [pause] No, I never married anyone, but uh . . . oh good grief . . . uh . . . you’ll have to help me.
NARRATOR: That’s all right. Do you remember meeting Sonia Mae Palms?
DAD: Sonia Mae Palms? Yeah, that . . .
NARRATOR: Sounds familiar?
DAD. Oh yeah.
NARRATOR: Do you know if you had any children?
DAD: I don’t think so.

NARRATOR hears JUDE interview begin and rushes to tie the LeTHE scarf to the DAD chair and then drag it with her. She struggles to do so and fails. She gives up and goes to the JUDE chair and interacts with him using movement to explore this relationship physically and emotionally. This moment is all about a mother and her child. The scene ends with JUDE’s line “this recording is over.”
Recording plays and excerpts are projected with images of Jude and his family.


NARRATOR: So Jude, you know how I interviewed Papaw for this play I am writing and how I asked him some questions?

JUDE: No. I can’t remember.

NARRATOR: I’d like to ask you some questions

JUDE. What?

NARRATOR: Can you tell me your full name?

JUDE. Jude Paxton Smith.

NARRATOR: How old are you?

JUDE. Um . . . 4?

NARRATOR: Do you know what today’s date is?

JUDE. Uh . . . no.

NARRATOR: Do you know what day of the week it is?

JUDE. No.

NARRATOR: Do you know what month this is?

JUDE. No.

NARRATOR: Do you know what season this is?

JUDE. No.

NARRATOR: Well if you had to guess, is it spring, summer, winter or fall?

JUDE. Spring.

NARRATOR: Do you know what year this is?

JUDE. Uh . . . no.

NARRATOR: Can you tell me where you were born?

JUDE. In Pennsylvania. Dillsburg.

NARRATOR: Can you tell me who’s in your family.

JUDE. Mamma. That’s you. Daddy and Granny and Papaw.

NARRATOR: Can you tell me what kinds of things you’d like to do when you grow up?

JUDE. Bloop, blop, neep dop, doop! Shake your butt.

The recording ends abruptly as a new soundscape begins. We hear the intermingling voices of DAD and JUDE as the NARRATOR tries to bring the two scarves and chairs together but gets tangled up and caught between the two.


Eventually my four-year-old son Jude won’t remember much of what is happening in his life right now. My seventy-year-old father has amnesia of another sort and retains
virtually nothing of his daily interactions with his grandson, but I want my son to know my father.

I still remember my father pleading with me in the early days of his illness, pleading with me not to forget.

DAD: Remember who I was. When my memory goes, I’m gone. Valerie, I want you to know that when I no longer recognize you as my daughter, you don’t need to come visit me. I didn’t want to visit my own father. What was the point? He didn’t recognize me. He didn’t know who I was. He was gone. Don’t visit me once I’m gone. And you don’t need to feel guilty about that. Just try to remember who I was.

NARRATOR: Dad repeated this wish over and over again. I’d go to visit my parents and Dad would come to me in tears and tell me to sit down. He said he wanted to talk and then he would make this speech. Afterwards he would hug me and we would hold hands and he seemed relieved. Then I’d go a get a drink of water or something and come back into the room and he would look at me hard and say, “Valerie, we need to talk” and the whole conversation would happen all over again, almost word for word. He did this for a period of about six months and then suddenly . . . he forgot . . . he worked through it? . . . it no longer mattered? I don’t know.

How do I honor my father’s wishes and remember who he was? To answer this question I started researching memory theory. Empirical research is my usual behavioral response to life’s difficult questions. Not prayer? Not therapy? Not reflection? No. Research! In the same way, when I first learned that I was pregnant I took a moment to inform the father and then headed straight for the library. Each stage of my son’s development and my father’s decline have led me deeper and deeper into empirical research.

NARRATOR: Not long ago a neurologist suggested that there are precise inverse relationships between the stages of Alzheimer’s disease and the stages of memory development. It’s as if my father’s brain is shutting down in almost exactly the reverse order that my son’s brain is expanding. One is forgetting how to tell his story. The other is discovering he has a story to tell.

JUDE: Mamma, let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a little bear and a big bear and they went on lots of adventures together, but one day the big bear
played a trick on the little bear and the big bear just wandered off. And the little bear was left all alone. Soon the little bear got lost and he didn’t notice that a wild beast spittler was chasing him and the wild beast spittler growled . . . but soon the spittler stopped. Next the little bear looked behind him and there was a prickly beast and the prickly beast said, "Who are you and what are you doing?" and the little bear said "Well, I’m a little bear, of course, and I’m lost and I can’t, I can’t find my way home. Can’t you help me find my way home?"

Projection. Jean Piaget, Swiss philosopher and child psychologist.

PIAGET: We can classify learning into two main categories: passive learning, relying primarily on memory, and active learning, relying on intelligent understanding and discovery. Our real problem is this: what is the goal of learning? What is the goal of memory? What is the goal of living?

NARRATOR: Ok.
JUDE. I would like to be a construction worker.
NARRATOR: What do construction workers do?
JUDE. Build . . build things . . build buildings lined with construction workers.
NARRATOR: Do you know what your papaw used to do?
JUDE. No.
NARRATOR: Well he used to be a construction worker. He used to build things.
JUDE. Oh.

NARRATOR: Piaget influenced a whole new generation of memory theorists who suggest that if you want to keep your memories alive you need to express them verbally. It is through the mother’s storytelling that the child forms a memory. The more exuberant and detailed the telling, the more likely the child is to remember.

NARRATOR:
When I build my house
It's so much fun
With the help of you
We'll get it done
When we build our house
We'll need some bricks
We will . . .
Lay the bricks
Lay the bricks
Lay the bricks
When we build our house.

NARRATOR: Once upon a time, Jude, there was a laborer. He worked in big power plants that helped supply electricity throughout the land. His work made the power to heat buildings and transport water. He was a strong man too because he had to lift heavy objects and crawl into tight spaces.

Recording cuts in.

NARRATOR: Do you remember what you did for a living?
DAD: I was a plumber and pipefitter at a couple of nuclear power plants.
NARRATOR: Did you like your work?
DAD: Oh, yeah.
NARRATOR: Any stories from your working days as a plumber and pipefitter?
DAD: Not particularly. Sometimes his job even put him in dangerous situations. He climbed up tall ladders and moved across high beams like a tight rope walker. He worked with sharp tools and used fire to work with metals. One day he decided to build his own house and I bet he sang:

When I build my house
It's so much fun
With the help of you
We'll get it done
When we build our house
We'll need some bricks
We will...

[NARRATOR uses JUDE chair to knock over block house.]

NARRATOR: Jude! Why did you knock Papaw's house down?
JUDE: I don't know. I don't know why I did it, Mamma.

PIAGET: Children at this stage of development learn how to arrange objects in an order according to size, shape, or any other characteristic. They can build a block house, knock it down and then retain a memory of it. Keep in mind, however, that if you ask a child at this stage of development why he did a certain action, such as knocking something over, he won't be able to remember. He cannot think in reverse.

NARRATOR: I love learning about all the changes Jude is going through. I watch him stacking his blocks by color and his tongue is in his check and his eyebrows are all
twisted up and it’s like this kid is concentrating so hard he could find the cure to cancer. Watching Jude is life-giving. On the other hand, I’m struggling to research the facts about my father’s memory loss. The medical jargon goes way over my head. Projection. Amyloid plaques? Projection. Neurofibrillary tangles? And, let’s face it, the data, the evidence, is all about the destruction of memory. It’s about loss. It’s life-sucking.

ANN: First let me begin with a few thoughts on Alzheimer’s. If I lapse into referring to people as patients it is a function of physician culture, and an artifact of the context in which I meet with and care for people affected by Alzheimer’s. [pause] Now, as you know, Alzheimer’s disease is the deterioration of the brain. As the brain breaks down, so do the activities of daily living. Seven stages of Alzheimer’s have been identified, but many patients die of other causes before they reach those final stages. The ultimate cause of the disease is unknown. It strikes regardless of gender, ethnicity, or class. New medications are sometimes helpful. At best, medication can slow down the decline, but even this is not the case for everyone. There is no cure, yet.

ALZHEIMER: My story begins in 1901, when I, Dr. Alois Alzheimer, visited a new patient at the Frankfurt Asylum. Auguste Deter, you can see her here, was a 51-year-old woman exhibiting a variety of peculiar behavioral symptoms as well as short-term memory loss. Ah, yes, here is an extract from her file:

She sits on the bed with a helpless expression. I ask, “what is your name?” “Auguste,” she replies. “What is your husband’s name?” Again she says, “Auguste.” “Your husband?” I ask. “Ah, my husband,” she replies and looks as if she didn’t understand the question. “Are you married?” I ask. “To Auguste,” she replies. “How long have you been here?” I ask. She seems to be trying to remember. I show her a pencil. “What is this?” “A pen,” she answers. She correctly identifies a wallet, a chair, and a watch. I show her different objects then wait a short time and ask her to remember them. She can’t. At lunch she eats cauliflower and pork. I ask what she is eating. She answers, “spinach.” In between my questions she always speaks about seeing twins. I ask her to write her name, Auguste Deter, she tries to write Frau and forgets the rest. She repeats, “I have lost myself.”
I asked that when Auguste died her brain be sent directly to me for further study. The year after Auguste's death, I described her illness to a group of psychologists in Tübingen. In the centre of an otherwise almost normal brain cell are two striking abnormalities. First, there is plaque, an accumulation of a substance in the superior layers. Second, there is a tangle and there stands out one or several fibrils. Numerous small miliary foci are also found in the superior layers. They are determined by the storage of a strange material in the cortex.

All in all we have to face a peculiar disease process, which has been verified recently in large numbers.

Recording.

NARRATOR: What kind of things make you happy?
DAD: Well, I used to like to go fishing. Projection. He never liked fishing. I used to be on the wrestling team.
NARRATOR: I remember when I was a little girl I'd hide behind the front door and wait for you to come home from work and then we'd wrestle.
DAD: Is that right? I don't have a memory of that.
NARRATOR: Yup. You'd teach me the half nelson and a few other moves.
DAD: [laughter] Is that right?
NARRATOR: Yup.
DAD: That's funny!

PIAGET: Keep in mind that children at this age are unable to take the point of view of others. They're egocentric. Your child truly believes that his mother and his grandfather think in the same way he does. He is not even aware that other people have different perspectives or circumstances. An egocentric child cannot stand in another person's shoes.

NARRATOR (as mother): Jude, we need to talk about Papaw.
JUDE: Ok.
NARRATOR: Papaw is sick. Papaw has a sickness called Alzheimer's and it means that he has a hard time remembering things.
JUDE: Alzheimer's? What can't he remember?
NARRATOR: What can't he remember? Well, you know how you just asked Papaw to go outside and play with you and he went upstairs to get his shoes and then never came back down. See, he probably went up to his room and forgot why
he was going there. And then he probably forgot that you asked him to go outside.

JUDE: That's boinkey head.

NARRATOR: Ok, Jude. I just wanted to tell you about Papaw's sickness so you can try to understand why Papaw has trouble remembering things. That's what happens to people with Alzheimer's.

JUDE: Ok. Mamma, can I have a treat? Can-dy?

NARRATOR: No, Jude. Not before dinner. So, tell me what you did at preschool today?

JUDE: I don't know. I don't know what I did.

NARRATOR: What do you mean you don't know what you did?

JUDE: I... I can't remember. I have... I have Alzheimer's.

ANN: Remember that every person has a unique journey with Alzheimer's, even though there are recognizable stages of development. [pause] It's been my experience that children of Alzheimer's patients are usually reluctant to talk about their own risk of developing the disease, an understandable haunting concern... I'm also aware that the pictures I paint tonight may be difficult for you to hear because of your own situation. Know that every case is unique in how it may progress, and remember to be careful about searching for answers about the future in other people's stories.

NARRATOR: Some people say that our memories gather together to create the soul. It's as if we work through our memories in an intimate and life-long conversation with God and the soul emerges. Memory resides in this soul-deep conversation. I love this image. But then I have to ask. What is happening to the storehouse of my father's memories? Where have they gone? What is happening to the man who isn't there. And more importantly, what is happening to my father's soul? If I believe in this notion that memory and soul are entwined then my father is not only experiencing the deterioration of his memories but also the deterioration of his soul. Shouldn't your soul be the one thing, no matter what, that remains sacred, untouched by disease? Is it any wonder that I am ambivalent about God at the moment? God, the lover of my soul?

Dennis is a 57-year-old man whose father lived with Alzheimer's. He rarely saw his father during his childhood and adolescence.
DENNIS: On October 6th, 2002 Helen, Dad’s fourth wife, and her lawyer dropped my Dad off at the Sacred Heart Behavioral Health Center. Now, I never liked Helen, but this was the first time I started to refer to her as the bitch. Dad went from confusion about where he was to rage over the fact that the bitch had dumped him there.

NARRATOR. Ironically, it was the disease that brought father and son together.

DENNIS: Some of this was due to prompting from his Sister Alice, but he was still with it enough to know he had been left behind. He had been a bit delusional and insisted that Helen had run around on him. He claimed that she had an affair with the pilot on the airplane back from their last trip to California. He said that one morning he got up and found the pilot sitting at the breakfast table. I sort of think Helen had her hands full more than I ever could have imagined.

Almost every day during this time Dad asked me to kill him. He would say, “You know, you have guns at home.”

Eventually my partner Daniel and I had to move Dad from Sacred Heart to Green Meadows, an assisted living center. When I went to visit Dad at Green Meadows I would say to myself, “it’s Showtime,” and I would make up stories about the two of us from my childhood. It was fun to create memories I wish I’d had, like father and son road trips or vacations. My dad actually seemed to have a better memory of these fantasies than he did of reality. You know, it’s strange. Those first six months I helped care for him were a magical thing. I could no longer hold him accountable for his absence in my life.

Some funny things happened at this time. He started thinking anything made of black plastic would work the TV set. This evolved from his Norelco shaver to eventually a comb. [Laughs] He’d grab the comb, point it at the TV and say, “why the fuck doesn’t this TV work?” My Dad took to swearing like a sea parrot. He would point out certain nurses and even use the “C” word. He was totally convinced that two of them were beating him up every night. Now, I never saw any marks on him, but I could understand if there were. Some days I wanted to punch him out.
Eventually they had to transfer Dad to a secured area in the basement. After that his moods became angry and he raged every time I had to go. One day he shook the locked door as I left calling me a “fucking son of a bitch” for leaving him there. I could still hear him as I exited the lobby. I cried all the way home that day. Thank God I had the rooms of AA to go to. Otherwise I doubt I would have been able to stay sober. One thing Dad always remembered was that I did not drink any more. We would go to lunch and I would kid and say, hey, “let’s have a martini,” and he would always tell me, “you cannot have a drink. This seemed very important to him.

Ultimately, I had to move Dad to Cedarbrook, the county home. We were down to less than $4,000. (beat) The nurses at Cedarbrook became like family to me. He liked to do what I called water sports at Cedarbrook. He would plug up the sink, turn on the water, lock the bathroom door and then sit and watch the fireworks when the nurses came in. They didn’t want to tell me when he went into diapers. Dad seemed more lost than ever at Cedarbrook, and yet he maintained certain habits. He still cleaned his silverware on his napkin before every meal. He did that almost till the end.

My Dad died on March 6th, 2006 because his brain forgot how to swallow. He could no longer eat and I had to decide whether or not a feeding tube was appropriate. Not. When my Dad died I was at peace with our relationship. I don’t think that could have been possible without his illness.

I think about him every day. I cherish the relationship I was able to have with the man who wasn’t there. Dad knew that I loved him and he told me he loved me in the early days of his disease. I always told him even on the days I’m sure he was thinking “who the hell is this?” I was in the course of his last year; the TV repair man, the janitor, his Brother Bud, someone named Harry and, every once in a while, his son Dennis. I love you, Dad.

NARRATOR: Be careful about searching for answers about the future in other people’s stories. Our stories are very different but is this my father’s future? Fact: My father’s father, the man who first owned this chair, died without his memories. Fact: My father’s sister lost herself just like Auguste Deter. Fact: My father is now between stage five and six of seven stages. Empirical question: Will I
develop Alzheimer’s disease? Theoretical question: What will I do?

NARRATOR. [as mother] Jude, there are a few more things I want you to know about your Papaw. When Mommy was in high school I invited him to something called Jazzercise. It was a big deal back then. Anyway, what you need to know is that Papaw was born with what is called a club foot which means he walked on the side of his foot, almost on his ankle, and his foot and his calf, this part of his leg, were very very small. Well, Jude Papaw loved Mama so much that he came to her Jazzercise class with his club foot. There was Papaw surrounded by middle-aged women bouncing to YMCA.

[music]

Ok, one more story. In 1976, when I was nine years old, Granny organized me and Papaw and Aunt Jennifer into a singing group to celebrate the bicentennial. This is when our country turned 200 years old. Yes, 200! We performed our songs at churches and nursing homes and sang in honor of the revolutionary freedom fighters. [slide] Papaw couldn’t hold a tune. Granny dressed him up in a revolutionary costume and he became a sort of backdrop for our performance. [Performed as a child]

Come on my hearts of tempered steel,
And leave your girls and farms,
Your sports and plays and holidays,
And hark, away to arms!

Chorus:
And fare thee well you sweethearts,
You smiling girls adieu;
And when the war is over,
We’ll kiss our loves so true.
My mother made up that line. The line she crossed out was
We’ll “kiss it out with you.” NARRATOR. Which I like much better.

[places chairs side by side]
The rising world shall sing of us,
A thousand years to come,
And to their children’s children tell,
The Wonders we have done.

Chorus:
And fare thee well you sweethearts,
You smiling girls adieu;
And when the war is over,
We’ll kiss it out with you.
Chorus:
And fare thee well you sweethearts, [to chairs]
You smiling girls adieu; [to self]
And when the war is over,
We'll kiss it out with you.

NARRATOR: [back to audience] I was raised in a strict Christian community. Out of respect for our families and our congregations my husband and I decided not have any dancing at our wedding. Looking back I wish I had the memory of dancing with my father on that particular day. Another memory I wish I had is that of seeing my father recognize his place in relationship to Jude’s birth. For him, Jude’s birthday was just another day. He’s never really understood that Jude is his grandson. I’m wondering, at this point in my research, if I can stray a bit from the facts.

Chair Dance
[During this movement piece we see the NARRATOR explore JUDE and DAD’s contrasting journeys in truth, fiction and imagination. Lethe and Mnemosyne appear. Projection of Dad. Projection of E-mail from Dad.]

NARRATOR: Of course, our father-daughter relationship wasn’t perfect; we’ve had our “moments,” times I disappointed him, and he me. [turn Jude chair to blocks with back to audience] When I was in my late twenties I went through a dark night of the soul. My father called me a quitter. We didn’t speak for months. In his defense, he was at that time probably in stage three of his illness and struggling to hide his memory problems from his co-workers. One day I received my first and only email from my father, who must have typed the message with his index finger.

[Recording of DAD? NARRATOR enters as the letter is projected. Sit in DAD chair.]

DAD: Hello, Valerie! Just thought that I would drop in on your screen and tell you that I miss talking with you. I want to tell you that I love you. I have loved you from the first time I heard you were conceived: that very night I knelt and prayed for this little developing life that was a part of me. I will continue to pray for you all my life and I will never stop loving you. I will always be a support to you in whatever way and means I’m able to be. I just want you to know that. I would never say that I can perceive the
situation that you have had to endure. But as I think back over the years about you as a young girl and teenager you were courageous, braver than most young women your age. I know as a runner you had stamina and you disciplined yourself to run through the pain and not stop until you finished the race. I know the situation you are going through right now is the most painful race of your life. I want to be here to be an encourager, to cheer you on, but when you reach the finish line and you know that you have given your all I want to be a part of those who gather around to hold you up, to keep you from collapsing, to celebrate with you. As you continue in whatever direction you go I want to be there for you because you are a part of me and I love you, Valerie, unconditionally. Your Dad.

DAD: [seated] I know it’s the Alzheimer’s. You don’t believe me, but I know it’s coming. I recognize the signs. I haven’t left my card at the ATM machine just once. I’ve done it several times. I can’t remember the guys names down at the union hall. I know it’s coming.

NARRATOR: Dad’s union buddies watched him struggle to remember where he was and how to get somewhere he’d been hundreds of times before. He’d been their friend, confidant and advocate for decades. In an effort to protect him, they took him out of the field and put him at a desk job. But Dad was too proud to stay in a job he could no longer manage and so he retired.

Later that year . . .

ALZHEIMER: [with pencil and file]. William Flower is a sixty-three-year-old, white male, with a recent history of cognitive dysfunction. He was employed as a representative for a plumbers union in Ohio. In attempting to keep track of phone messages, agreements, union staff on jobs, and other information, he was frequently distracted and lost track of his commitments. Eventually his shortcomings were mentioned by his supervisor, but led to no disciplinary actions. Instead, Herr Flower chose to retire somewhat earlier than he had planned to avoid further embarrassment. [with clipboard, addressing the DAD chair] Herr. Flower I’m going to ask you a series of questions. Are you ready? Good.

What is today’s date?
What day of the week is it?
What is the season?
What state are we in?
What city?
What year was last year?
What building are we in?
I’m going to name three objects and I want you to repeat them back to me in a few moments: wallet, chair, watch.
Now, I’d like you to count backwards from one hundred by serial sevens.
Spell “world” backwards. . . . world . . . world!
What do a bicycle and a train have in common?
Interpret this proverb for me: “A stitch in time saves nine.”
Close your eyes, stick out your tongue, touch your left ear with your right hand. Do a cartwheel.
Now, we’re almost done. Just one more question. Can you repeat back to me the three objects I mentioned a moment ago?
No?! Then you failed the test! Congratulations! YOU HAVE ALZHEIMER’S!!!!!!

NARRATOR: [improv] Ok, hold up. I know I didn’t script this, but I couldn’t pass that test if I had to take it right now. I would fail. Could you pass that test? Do I have Alzheimer’s at forty? Is this early onset? Maybe it’s just stress. Do you think it’s stress? Yeah, that’s it. It’s stress. [coat back on] I’m fine. OK, go ahead and cue the music.

DAD: I knew it was coming. There’s nothing I can do about it. I’ve had a good life. I can’t complain.

DAD. [far SR] I had to lock myself in the bathroom so I wouldn’t hurt myself or anybody else. They’ve put me on anti-depressants. They talk about me as if I’m not even in the room. It’s been decided that I can’t drive anymore. It’s been decided that I need an identification bracelet like a dog. Why shouldn’t I be depressed? Isn’t it normal to be depressed when you find out you have Alzheimer’s? I don’t want to numb the pain. It’s part of life. So you know what I’ve been doing, Valerie? You have to promise me you won’t tell your mother? I act like I’m swallowing the pills, like this, [shows her] and then I flush them down the toilet. I’m not taking them. [take off coat]

NARRATOR. Two years ago my husband Brian, Jude and my parents moved into a new home together. Two very different families converged. On moving day it became clear that I
needed to take Jude and Dad far away from the chaos. Dad and Jude buckled up and we hit Route 15 heading toward Harrisburg. I'd been consumed by the move. I was behind on everything, including car maintenance. An electrical feature is malfunctioning. Every few seconds I'd hear a ding and see a message on the dashboard that reads "memory device disabled." I'm not kidding. The ding tells me I need gas, or maintenance, or air in the tires. I didn't need any of those things. I had a full tank of gas and plenty of air in the tires.

[ding]

DAD: What's that?

NARRATOR (as mother and daughter): It's just an electrical problem, Dad. Something is wrong with the gas gauge.

DAD: Oh.

JUDE: Mamma, is this a city?

NARRATOR: Yes, Jude. It is a city. Do you know what city we live in?

JUDE: Uh, is it the Americans?

NARRATOR: Close Jude. We live in North America and we are Americans, but we live in the city of Harrisburg.

[ding]

DAD: What's that?

NARRATOR: Dad, it's just an electrical problem with the gas gauge.

DAD: Oh. . . . What state are we in?

NARRATOR: We are in Pennsylvania, Dad.

JUDE: Is that a city, Mamma?

[ding]

DAD: What's that?

NARRATOR: The car is telling us we don't have any gas but we do have plenty of gas. It says the memory device is disabled.

DAD: Huh!

JUDE: Is that a city, Mamma!?!?

NARRATOR: Is what a city, honey?

JUDE: Pennsylvania?

NARRATOR: No, Jude Pennsylvania is the state and Harrisburg is the city.

DAD: "Support Our Troops." What's that yellow ribbon all about?

MOTHER: It's about the war in Iraq. Our troops are in Iraq . . .

DAD: Iraq! There's a war in Iraq?!? That's news to me. That truck is a Conway. Florida plates. Quite a rig.

JUDE: What truck?
[ding]
DAD: What’s that?
NARRATOR: [starting to give up] It’s just a problem with the electrical, Dad.
DAD: Oh.
JUDE: What Truck? What truck, Papaw?
DAD: I didn’t say anything about a truck. A truck? All I see is a car that says “student driver.” Huh!. I’ve never seen that before. What state are we in anyway?
JUDE: I know, I know, Harrisburg!
NARRATOR: Close Jude. We are in the city of Harrisburg in the state of Pennsylvania.
DAD: I thought we were in Florida?
[ding]
DAD: What’s that?
JUDE: Papaw, Mamma told you it’s a problem with the electrical.
[ding]
NARRATOR: Dad, don’t even ask. It’s nothing.

PIAGET: At this stage of development your son can’t grasp the idea of transformation. He is more focused on specific stages as opposed to the transformations between one stage and the next.

JUDE: This is fun Mamma. I’m a good gardener.
NARRATOR (as mother): Yes, you are, Jude. You are doing a great job with planting your seeds. They are soooo tiny, aren’t they? It’s hard to pick the seeds up even with your little fingers.
JUDE: This is hard work, Mama, lots of hard work we’re doing planting these seeds.
NARRATOR: That’s right Jude. Helping something to grow from a seed to a flower takes a lot of patience and a lot of care. Ok, now we need to put some soil on top of the seeds so they can be planted in the ground and begin to grow.
JUDE: I can do that, Mama. That’s my job.
NARRATOR: Ok Jude, just scoop out some soil and fill the holes where you placed the seeds.
JUDE: We’re doing lots of hard work and these seeds need someone like me to care for them.
NARRATOR: Yes, they do. That’s what makes you a gardener.
JUDE: Ok, let’s watch.
NARRATOR: Watch what?
JUDE: Watch the flowers grow, Mamma. They grow like this and this and this. [he demonstrates]
NARRATOR: Jude, it’s going to take several days before we even see a tiny sprout from one of those seeds. Each seed needs time to change and become a flower.
JUDE: Why is it taking so long?

ALZHEIMER: In stage six Herr Flower will experience severe cognitive decline. Significant personality changes may emerge and he might need help with daily activities. At this point he may lose awareness of recent experiences and events. He should be able to remember his own name but he will occasionally forget the names of his family members. He might put his shoes on the wrong feet. He may need help with flushing toilet, wiping and disposing of tissue properly. He will probably have some episodes of urinary or fecal incontinence. He could develop suspicions, delusions, hallucinations or repetitive behaviors. Since he can’t remember information long enough to act on his ideas he will lose the will to act. He may start to wander and become lost.

Lost Dance
[This movement piece tells the story of a man who becomes lost. Lethe and Mnemosyne appear.]

NARRATOR: Anything else you’d like to say or ask?
DAD: Well, I like to fish and I like to wrestle and, let’s see, of course when I was a little older I liked my old car. [laughs] It was a coupe. I think it was a Pontiac or a Plymouth. Just a two door car.
NARRATOR: You had some good times in that car?
DAD: Oh yeah. [laughs] I’ve always had good times.
NARRATOR: [laughs]

PIAGET: In my observation of children your son’s age I notice that they experience intuitive thought for the first time. This happens when the child is able to believe in something without knowing why he believes it.
NARRATOR: So, you are telling me that Jude now has the capacity to have faith in something he can’t see?
PIAGET: Notice how Jude knows how to use mental symbols, words and pictures, to represent something which is not physically present.

JUDE: Mamma, where is God?
NARRATOR (as mother): Where is God? Well, um, God is everywhere. God is here between you and me and even inside
us. Someone once told me that God is the love between people.

JUDE: Where is God inside me?

NARRATOR: I don’t know how to explain it, Jude. When I was little I learned about God through Jesus, but I also believe that God is in everything around us.

JUDE: If God is all around us then why can’t I see God?

NARRATOR: Well, that’s a very good question. I guess what I mean is that I think we can see the evidence of God. Evidence . . . that’s a big word, isn’t it? Ok, like the wind. You can’t see the wind but you can see what the wind does when it moves through the trees, right?

JUDE: Where is God in the trees, Mama? Is God in that tree?

NARRATOR: I think God is in that tree.

JUDE: Mamma, I think, I think God is in me, and you, and Daddy, and Papaw and Granny and the trees, and the flowers, and the birds , . . and even in the wind. [sound of wind]

NARRATOR: What kind of things make you happy?

JUDE: Uh . . . candy? Is ice cream a kind of candy?

NARRATOR: It is a kind of sweet. Who are some of the people you love?

JUDE: You and Daddy and Granny and Papaw. I love everyone in the whole world.

NARRATOR: Wow! That’s a lot of love.

JUDE: God is our love.

NARRATOR: Is that right?

JUDE: Yeah. Time’s running out, silly. Our recording is done.

NARRATOR: Dostoyevski confessed that “It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.” Doubt has been a component of my faith for as long as I can remember. When I was a little girl I “got saved.” In fact, it happened several times. It happened with my mother during bedtime prayers; it happened at my Baptist Elementary school with my second grade teacher; Mrs. Bitler, it happened with my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Rail; it happened several times in my closet; once under by bed with my Mrs. Beasley Doll. I had no problem getting saved, but I had a doozie of a time believing that I was still a child of God five minutes after the conversion. In fact, I was not certain that God was even real. I despaired over my lack of belief for months before going to my father. We went outside and sat in his truck and I asked him in a thousand different ways
how he knew that God was real. [in truck with Dad by end of monologue]

NARRATOR (as little girl): But how do you know God is real, Daddy? That Jesus is real?

DAD. Well, Valerie, it's really very simple. You have to have faith. You believe in something you can't understand.

NARRATOR: But what is faith, Daddy, and how do I know if I have it?

DAD. Eventually you have to stop asking questions, Valerie. Trust in God.

NARRATOR: My father believed and it was a part of what made him human. His faith was his greatest joy and comfort. Here I am in my forties wanting to have that same conversation with my father. I have a longing for an empirically proven God. I want Piaget to explain the seven stages of faith. I can't be certain that every memory lost to my father is waiting for him in a better place. I am painfully aware that I can't prove that at the end of my father's suffering is a heavenly home.

My father left the Roman Catholic Church nearly 50 years ago. He became what he referred to as "born again." For several reasons he resented his experience with the Catholic Church and was deeply disturbed when I chose to worship in the Episcopal tradition. When my father came to Jude's christening, I was surprised to see him walk up to partake in the Eucharist.

PRIEST: Holy, mighty, and merciful Lord, heaven and earth are full of your glory. In great love you sent to us Jesus, your Son, who reached out to heal the sick and suffering, who preached good news to the poor, and who, on the cross, opened his arms to all.

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying; take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying; This cup is the new covenant
in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

NARRATOR: My father dropped to his knees opened his mouth and offered his tongue to receive the host. I stood there shocked. I had never seen him do this in my entire life, and yet it was as if he had been repeating this gesture every week for the past 70 years. Habit? Remembrance?

Is suffering essential to faith? What do I do with the man who is still here in body? Where is the soul of a man with no memories? What is our relationship now that he’s forgotten I’m his daughter? What if this happens to me?

After all my research I have one discovery. Faith and memory are connected. I can re-member the story of Christ, his life, death and resurrection. I remember the church, its human stain. I choose to remember a loving God. [Takes the bread and wine.] Sometimes I want to forget, but I try to live the questions.

For now, I’m done with the research. I watch from the gap between remembering and forgetting, amazed by the poignancy of the present moment. Now is everything.

[Lethe film]
In the final stage, speech becomes limited to just six or seven words and intelligible vocabulary is limited to a single word. You will lose the ability to walk, sit up, smile. Eventually you cannot hold your head up. The brain now appears unable to tell the body what to do. [Move the two chairs side by side]

Somewhere in this 3 lb mass I have stored the following fact: When my father and my son sit together, each with his own ice cream cone, it’s pure and present pleasure. I remember this now. I fear I will forget it.