

Bayside Oaks

October 2005

Donning the requisite iPod and spinning the dial to find the "Running Music" playlist (wishful thinking), I stepped out of the small three-bedroom Cape Cod home on Horatio Parkway and turned right onto the sidewalks of Bayside Oaks.

Bayside seems to have become impossibly small, as if it has been recreated at seven-eighths scale to evoke a sense of nostalgia. It appears to me as a cross between the real world and a Lego construction or, perhaps, it has been reconstructed as "Baysideland"—a new tourist attraction.

Aside from my perception of scale, the streetscape of Bayside Oaks has been transformed by a new polyglot generation of residents drawn to its highly desirable location—less than thirty minutes to Manhattan by train. While some of the homes have been altered with brick siding, lovely gardens, and new paint schemes, others have been torn down and replaced with oversized two and three-story edifices that strain the boundaries of the property lines and, in many instances, good taste. Greco-Roman columns, fountains, porticoes, and grand stairways abound. The Long Island Railroad meets the Acropolis.

Walking briskly along Horatio Parkway, I enter the playground, known in my childhood as "The Park." It was here that we swung, slid, and climbed the monkey bars. For those not familiar with monkey bars, this was an approximately six-foot grid of metal bars allowing us to climb to the top and then fall, hitting our heads on every bar until we unceremoniously landed on the asphalt. Even as a child, I distinctly recall wondering what adults were thinking when they erected this device.

I walk through the park, past the basketball courts where I spent most high school afternoons, and onto the path through the woods. Walking down the steep slope that we had termed "Dead Man's Hill" (every city has a sled-riding "Dead Man's Hill"; ours traversed an approximate twenty-degree incline, hooked up sharply at the end, and emptied onto a busy thoroughfare), I walked across the street and joined the crowd of walkers and joggers circumnavigating "the lake."

Now, as it was when I was a child, the lake is a beautiful, quiet refuge from the bustling streets of Queens, New York. The exercisers—Asian American, Black, and Hispanic—reflect the multicultural transformation of Bayside. We nod and smile as we pass one another,



each encapsulated in his own MP3 world. To me, these joggers and walkers are interlopers—not because of their status as émigrés, but because this is my lake. Close to half a century ago, these woods were my woods. This was where I spent my afternoons as a child, sometimes with friends but often alone. A wild, uncharted terrain of wonder and mystery, it was perfect for hide-and-seek and journeys of the imagination—pirates, cowboys and Indians. Once a year, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the lake was transformed into the bearer of our community's transgressions as multitudes of congregants from the Jewish Center of Bayside Oaks, clutching plastic bags of rice and bread, would walk to the lake for Tashlich¹ to cast our sins upon the waters.

Once around the lake, I walk up the street past Birmingham Parkway and right onto Garland Drive to 222-29—my house. I pause for a long moment to reflect and allow the memories to wash over me. Silly memories: the day my father and I spent hours stapling wire mesh over our backyard fence to keep Nigel, our Great Dane, from escaping through the fence posts, only to have him majestically jump over the moment we were done. My foot race home with my sister, in which I ensured victory by diving through the glass storm door (dripping with blood from multiple cuts, my father scooped me up and carried me to Dr. Gerstenhaber's at the end of the block...yet again). Painful memories of the day my father passed away.

I move on and turn right into Queensboro Community College, built in 1959 on the site of the Oakland Country Club which provided a spectacular childhood wilderness during snowy winter months. I walk through the campus, onto 56th Avenue, past Cardozo High School, where I spent three adolescent years and was among the first graduating class in 1970. Up 56th Avenue, past the Jewish Center of Bayside Oaks, where I attended weekly Sabbath services and, as a pre-pubescent eleven-year-old, sang as a soprano in the High Holiday choir. I head back to my mother's home on Horatio Parkway.

My mother shares this small Cape Cod home with Leon, her third husband. Together, they are among the few remaining original settlers of Bayside Oaks, first built as a subdivision of three-bedroom homes in 1955. Leon, a fine and gracious man, was an alto in the same Jewish Center of Bayside Oaks High Holiday choir, was also the leader of weekly Junior Congregation, and taught me how to daven (pray). Ten years ago, upon the death of his wife, he and my mother were married, and she returned to dwell in the neighborhood of my childhood.

¹ Tashlich is a Jewish custom dating from at least as early as the fourteenth century, but probably much earlier, where Jewish communities gather on the first day of Rosh Hashanah at bodies of water and cast bread crumbs or rice into water while reciting verses from Psalms. The rice and bread are seen as a representation of our wrongdoings, and through these actions we express a desire to be absolved of our sins.



My mother is, and has always been, quite beautiful. Wedding pictures of her and my father as a young couple show a striking pair. My father, with striking grey eyes, wavy hair, and a muscular physique, and my mother with dark brown hair, large beautiful brown eyes, and a shapely figure. There was a bit of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in them. She was, if my childhood memory serves me, or as my memory has chosen to serve me, the talk of Bayside Oaks. This status is punctuated by distant childhood memories of her playing the lead in two Jewish Center of Bayside Oaks theatrical productions: "South Pacific" and "Wish You Were Here." Memories of long nights of rehearsals, practicing songs at the piano in our living room and then Susan, Ruth, Eve, and I wearing our best, recently purchased High Holiday clothes to attend opening nights.

I embrace the memories of Bayside and all that it evokes of my childhood in the context and presence of my mother's recently diagnosed Alzheimer's disease. Memories have taken on a new meaning and a new urgency for me. They are not to be taken for granted, and I feel compelled to secure and somehow protect them. I am reminded of the old, black-and-white Polaroid photos and the necessity of wiping them with a fixing agent to ensure that they wouldn't fade. If only there were a fixing agent for our memories.

It has become difficult for my mother to describe events of days past or of the day that has just passed. "We went to that special place to buy things." "We went to eat at that place where we always go." She confuses nouns and proper nouns; I become Leon, my wife becomes my sister, the car becomes "the thing we drive in."

She is aware of her condition and calls it her "disease." She understands what is happening and holds onto the soft hope that the combination of medications will arrest its development. She speaks with sadness and sympathy of her cousin Hy, who also has Alzheimer's and is faring far worse than she. "He does not have the things that I have" (I believe she is referring to new medications).

Does she fully understand the path she is on?

Upon return from my Bayside meanderings, my mother and I go out for breakfast at the Scobee Grill in Little Neck. Driving down Northern Boulevard evokes more memories. A golf driving range has replaced Kiddy City, a small amusement park on the banks of Little Neck Bay. How long has it been since the "Shoppers Food Warehouse" replaced Bohack's Supermarket? Oriental stores and restaurants have proliferated.

Over breakfast, I encourage my mother to talk of her youth and how she met my father. She talks in vague, ambiguous phrases and I work hard to help fill in the details.

"I was at a place" (I believe it was a small women's college), "and men would come and visit."

"I was dating another man, who loved me and kept trying to give me something" (I believe it may have been some form of jewelry, perhaps a class ring).

"I met my...father, I mean my husband, at a place" (I cannot decipher this).

"He was so very handsome, and we fell in love immediately."

"We wanted to get married right away, but we had to wait until my sister got married first. When we got married, it was at the same place as my sister."

These words that define who we are—these nouns, adjectives, names, places that give meaning and structure to the individualized world we have constructed over decades—what happens when we cannot find them? What happens when we cannot find the words in our own mind? There was a person who I loved, who I married, with whom I had children and shared a life. He died, he was too young, I was heartbroken; who is that person? Does our life slip away? Do we cease to understand the path that brought us to this moment?

I work hard to be my mother's partner in memory, and together we come to share her story. Perhaps this is the nature of our lives. We create and share collective memories—family memories, ethnic memories, national and global memories. This sharing of memories is among the core elements that bind us to one another. My sisters and I have taken up the responsibility to help my mother be part of this collective family memory. We are richer for it, but there is a price to pay.

Early in the onset of her condition, she told a friend that she had "autism." Several years before the onset of my mother's dementia, our son was diagnosed as autistic, and it is evident that these two conditions have become conflated for her. There is an intriguing logic to that as, to an extent, Alzheimer's is autism going out. Autism can be the loss of future connections while Alzheimer's is a loss of the past.²

In an attempt to slow her cognitive decline, I call upon my Floortime techniques to engage my mother: I talk with high affect and encourage emotion; I follow her lead and encourage her to elaborate on things she is speaking about. I challenge her and push her to recall events and people in her past. I crack jokes and we recall funny stories of our past. Our conversations are enriched: we laugh and share memories as we find them.

In the face of a fading past and an inevitable, frightening future, my relationship with my mother is deepened and enriched. Our daily phone calls have become warmer, more intimate. I begin by announcing myself with high affect—to get things started and to ensure that she knows who it is: "HI MOM!" I can hear the joy in her voice as she responds: "Hello, my son." We give each other a rundown of the day's events and an update on children and relatives: Alya beginning her doctoral program; Naomi spending the year in Israel and visiting cousin Jeremy in Jerusalem; Jacob participating in his drama group; Jo working hard to build a private practice. She tells me of her day—as she is able—and hands the phone to

² DIR/Floortime is a developmental-based approach for engaging autistic children and helping them return to a more normative developmental track. The approach was remarkably impactful with our son and it is a featured element of our father son memoir "A Miracle of the Heart: A Father and Son's Autism Journey."

Leon when further explanation is required. We end in a manner we never did before the onset of her illness—by saying "I love you."

Why is it that we only truly appreciate the present when we begin to lose the capacity to embrace the past or hope for a future?

I seize every business-related visit to New York as an opportunity to see her. I sleep in the back room of their house, in a bed piled high with worn comforters, next to the antique breakfront that once sat in my grandmother's living room.

"Isn't this beautiful? It belonged to my mother. I'm going to give it to Susan for her new place." She tells me this each time I visit. I nod my head and agree that it is quite beautiful.

Each visit, she complains about her new wide-screen television set: "Leon's son bought us this thing, but it never works." "It was so expensive, and it never works. I have to go to the basement to watch our old thing—but it is too cold."

As she is able, my mother takes stock of her life and measures her days. She talks of how lucky she is: four children, fifteen grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. She is giving many of her prized possessions away; her parents' magnificent breakfront is given to Susan; Jo and I now possess her beautiful crystal and silverware. She casts off these heirlooms as she casts off her memories; she is letting go.

It will not be long before Leon no longer has the capacity to care for her in this small home. In anticipation, he is carefully and meticulously cleaning out the basement—going through long unopened, dusty boxes. He uncovers photographs: my sister Eve and me (eight and fourteen years old) eating ice cream at Ghirardelli Square; my grandparents climbing Masada in Israel in 1968; Nigel, our Great Dane, standing up with his paws on my shoulders. Other boxes reveal other artifacts: jewelry; my ID bracelet—a Bar Mitzvah gift from my grandparents; my high school graduation ring. Documents: my original social security card; my first passport.

In a seemingly paradoxical manner, my mother's Alzheimer's disease has brought me closer to my own past as I return to Bayside Oaks and walk the streets, as I talk with my mother and we become partners in memories. Puzzle pieces of my own life, once lost, reemerge and fall into place. It is as if there is a law of conservation of memory; as my mother's memories diminish, mine are renewed.

When people ask me how my mother is doing, I answer as she would: "It is what it is"—a resignation, an acceptance that life will play itself out in its own manner. Not fatalistic but "fragilistic"—a recognition that we are all fragile and mortal. We possess only a marginal ability to control or direct our own destinies. Perhaps the combination of medications will slow the progression of her Alzheimer's disease. But "it is what it is," and it will progress. Painful, difficult days await us. For now, I call every day and visit when I can. We talk of the time that has passed and search our shared memories for stories of days gone by. We laugh, talk about our family, and end each conversation with "I love you." For the moment, we are both comforted.

Her illness has also brought a sense of wholeness to our relationship. The days of blaming my parents for my psychological challenges seem both distant and irrelevant. Intergenerational emotional recriminations now seem so meaningless and foolish. To my mother's mantra "It is what it is," I add "We are who we are." Perhaps the Alzheimer's-imposed necessity of living in the present has relieved us and freed us of the emotional pains and frustrations of the past. We are who we are—now.

Recently, I hitched a ride to New York with a friend and took the Long Island Railroad to Bayside to visit my mother. Rather than being picked up at the station, I took advantage of a crisp, beautifully clear March day to stroll along Bell Boulevard, a main street of my youth. Long gone was Creamy Egg Cream, the small soda fountain that served that delicious elixir, unique to New York, which contained neither cream nor eggs. Hertlein's, the family-owned bakeshop that provided the remarkable sheet cakes for every Raphael child birthday, was no longer. Outside the train station, a new sign that seemed to welcome my visit to my past read "Historic Bayside." I stopped, smiled, and snapped a photo.

Leon and my mother met me at Starbucks, and we sat for coffee. I watched as my mother slowly and cautiously made her way through the double doors, and I rose to greet her.

"Hi Mom."

"What brings you to New York, sweetheart?"

"I wanted to see you."

Her warm, round brown eyes grew softer and moist. "You are so sweet."

We headed back to her home. I logged onto the computer to show her the latest pictures of our family. We talked of Alya, Naomi, and Jacob. She showed me a card Alya had sent her. "She is so wonderful; she is always sending me these things."

My sister Susan drove from Westchester, and we traveled down Northern Boulevard to a small Greek restaurant in Little Neck. Over Greek salad, spanakopita, and a large plate of assorted dips, we recalled the past, talked of our children, and laughed.

Across the table, my mother looked at me with such love that I was momentarily taken aback. I realize how joyful my visit has made her and how grateful she is for our time together. For a brief moment, it feels like a burden. The unconditional love between parent and child has been redefined and realigned, and I now fully understand that our respective roles have forever been dramatically changed—to an extent, reversed. She needs me; she longs for the times when I return home. I exhale and embrace this burden, this role, this responsibility, this love.

We walk arm in arm down the streets that I have known for so long. The past diminishes. The Bayside Oaks of my childhood is fading. The streets grow smaller; the houses disappear and are replaced by ones I do not recognize. Trees, small when I was a child, are now large. They send their roots under the sidewalk and lift the concrete. The path is uneven, and I hold on tight to my mother so she does not lose her footing. I will hold on as long as I can.

I am reminded of a song she sang from the Jewish Center of Bayside Oaks production of "Wish You Were Here":

"Where did the night go so soon, so soon?

So young but a moment ago

*So young, but a moment ago"*³

©David Raphael 2005



³ "Wish You Were Here". Book by Arthur Kober and Joshua Logan and music and lyrics by Harold Rome.