Here are some common phrases we use to talk about HOME:

- Home is where the heart is.
- A home away from home
- A house is not a home
- Make yourself at home
- There’s no place like home
- A man’s home is his castle
- Men make houses, women make homes
- Keep the home fires burning

In the US, we celebrate Mother’s Day and Memorial Day in May. Both holidays are designed to have us stop and appreciate that which made us who we are and those who came before to create this situation and place in which we live. Both, in the best circumstances, provide a combination of wonderful memories and gratitude for all that we have that we hold dear. So what does this have to do with the thing we call home?

“Mom, home, and apple pie” is an old phrase that has been used to describe that good place we can go to feel loved, be comforted, and get satisfied. Memorial Day was created to honor those who died in military service, defending our home land for all who live there. Two very different takes on home. In one, we have a safe loving place to be and in the other we seem to know that we owe a tremendous amount to those who lost their lives, not at home, defending our right and privilege to be in ours.

My thinking and sharing for this month are therefore centered on, HOME. What is it? Where is it? Why is it so important to us? How is it defined for each of us? What happens when we can’t go home or find our home? What makes a home a home? Why do human beings need a home place, space, experience? What does it do for us that makes it one of the most commonly uttered phrases by people who are living with dementia? AND one of the most painful to hear?

To try to create some structure and consistent process when I am trying to understand the meaning of home to any one person, I use an organizer. Something to help my brain consider possibilities and then put the pieces together into something I can understand and use to guide and direct my actions of supporting and helping. When it comes to thinking about HOME, I start by recognizing the importance for all creatures to have a place of comfort, connection, fulfillment, safety, being in control, and belonging. It is not just a place or space, but that is part of it. It is not just one experience or the same for all of us. For some it, never really existed as it was meant to be, and alternatives had to be found or created. While others till can create that sense of completeness and control almost anywhere. It includes people (those who are present), places (a location), and programming (what is going on).
I have created the idea of four Fs and four Ss to help in my organizing around environmental issues, that environment in which I exist. Typically, humans like environments that match their preferences and meet their needs. These eight categories provide the breadth and depth options that allow me to figure things out for a person who is looking for home, does feel at home, or is trying to create a home.

The four Fs are: Friendly, Familiar, Functional, and Forgiving

Let’s tackle the four Fs first:

Friendly: making an environment have a home-like feel for a person will require us to learn about what they find to be friendly and yet respects the need for aloneness, as well. We live in our homes, in neighborhoods, or communities, but we get to choose when we are in or out. A friendly place is one in which people and things are available that match what makes me most comfortable, but that I can access and enjoy as I like. Finding out about my past and my previous relationship behaviors may guide us in considering what is happening and what might be missing. Think about yourself. What makes a situation and place feel friendly to you, like you are home? Being friendly at a place of worship or at work is different. Being friendly at home means I am understood on a very deep and important level. That my moods and needs are respected and there is an acceptance of all my warts and I am liked as well as loved, even with my bad side showing! Could it be that the person in need is not feeling that sense of the just right amount of friendly? What is possible to create that feeling or experience for that individual?

Familiar - Human brains are able to calm and become more ready to take in new data when they find SOMETHING familiar about what they are experiencing. There is a very basic survival drive found in all creatures. When you have need for security, find a place and space to feel safe and secure. Where food can be safely consumed. Where intimacy can take place. Where cleaning and grooming is safe and promoted. Where others who I know and trust are found. It starts with mom and builds outward. Creating a place that has familiar structure, items, people, activities and expectations is fairly simple when you can share with me what is familiar. As dementia changes the internal architecture of the brain, it alters how and when the person perceives home and what and who should be there and what should be happening there. Sometimes, we who are trying to help, forget the possible value of familiar smells, tastes, touches, sounds, and other more basic home-like sensory elements. When we try to convince someone who is sure they are in the wrong place that we are correct and they are wrong, we only serve to frustrate them more. That which should be comforting and familiar looks foreign and unwelcoming. Explanations and verbal frustrations on the part of those in the environment tend to make it more unfamiliar and unfriendly, causing the person to want to flee or fight to find that which they most want.

Functional – knowing what to do where I am enhances my feeling of being at home. It is a place and space where I feel secure in knowing that I know how to do what I like to do. I generally have habits and routines in my home place. I go here to do this, I then go over there to do that. The set-up, timing, and sequencing of events and activities is based on a pattern and what I can find and use in various places. When someone
is trying to help me feel at home, it is important to follow as many of the patterns as is possible. My actually abilities may be limited but the feeling is there. I can wash dishes, although they have to be cleaned again, because I only washed them, dried them and put them away, completely skipping the rinsing step. I may try to take apart a sink with my tools, and only forget to turn off the water in my effort to complete a maintenance activity. I will NEED things to do that are possible. That which is not safe or useful will benefit from substitution for success and simplicity.

Forgiving – Above all else, a great home offers forgiveness. A belief that no matter what I am worthy and complete. My errors will not keep me from that place. My mistakes will not cost me my home. Homes are places, people, and activities that allow me to fail without humiliation or embarrassment. While not all homes are this way, when it comes to living with dementia this is that place and feeling most sought out. Forgiveness comes in many forms. Words of forgiveness, edges and corners that are not sharp, plastic glassware with a textured surface can allow me to carry it on my own and pick up if I drop it without the feel of shards of glass everywhere offers a special kind of forgiveness. In a good home, forgiveness goes both ways. As care supporters and partners we must certainly MUST find ways to forgive ourselves for our own failures and mistakes and simply learn from them, so we can try to do better again tomorrow and find our way HOME as well.

The four Ss are: Space, Social, Sensory, Surfaces

Surfaces – This includes everything that touches me or I can touch. My home has seating surfaces, standing and walking surfaces, sleeping surfaces, and working surfaces of many kinds. These surfaces must meet all my doing needs. The flooring and carpeting, as well as the transitions between, may become challenges or risky for me as my dementia increases. I may think the pattern in the carpet are little pieces to be picked up and in my effort to do so, I pitch forward onto my face as I lose my balance. The sunshine on a shiny floor may look wet and slippery to me, so I may refuse to move across it. The stairs look very different going down than they do going up. Handrails may become essential and more helpful as I leave my walker in all sorts of odd places, and use my hands as guides as I try to navigate my new home through a combination of touch and sight. Making sure I have table-top surfaces that promote use of my hand skills and eye-hand abilities. Allowing me to complete complex tasks at a table of right height and location, whether using both hands and all ten digits or simply rubbing a dusting rag back and forth. These actions will help me feel at home and use what I have available for as long as possible.

Spaces – Finding places in my home that match my preferences for feel and size, location and appearance are helpful to helping me feel like I belong in the place. Of vital importance is a provision of respect and acknowledgement of my human space needs. My need for others to respect of my intimate, private space (arm’s reach from my body) although I may not be able to do the same in response. My desire is that my personal space preferences be honored. I may well want you to pause and get permission to come within my six foot range (double arm’s length away from my body). For those who want to be in control, getting permission to move in closer and seek out a conversation to touch is a KEY to my feeling at home. For others who
seek connections, the availability of others around me who seem to like and want to be close to me and with me, makes me feel included and like I am with friends and family in my home. In our homes we have different spaces for different things, and we travel freely and purposefully from one space to another without trouble. This changes with dementia. The person may need help with visual or gestural cues to find spaces that they can’t find or even seek out without help.

Sensory – Consider all the sensory experiences that signal HOME. What is seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted that gives joy and feels right makes us feel at home. As supporters, we will need to be aware, are we creating an unfriendly and unwelcoming sensory environment that does NOT reflect what we would want in our own homes? Are we yelling across rooms, making lots of clatter, talking on our phones, interrupting others? If so, what can WE do to change the experience? Is there too much going on in some locations and nothing happening in others? Does that imbalance, cause more and more crowding or action in one place while other places go unused? Determining what sensory experiences are enriching and empowering and which are overwhelming and distracting can go a long way in making a person feel at home and finding a place to want to be.

Social – Knowing who is in my house and being comfortable with their presence is a core part of feeling at home. Having guests over is always exciting, but eventually we do want them to go home, so we can relax and get into our comfy stuff. Where we grew up and who else was always in our home may vary greatly. Recognizing differences and feelings about having others, not always of your choosing, around can assist us thinking through the importance of helping those who did not live in crowded or a shared home setting in finding a way to feel OK with all these people around all the time. OR, we might find the person must go to a private space and take time away. Creating quiet solo spaces and relaxed and active common spaces and inviting people to go from one to the other as the day flows by, can go a long way in helping a person go from seeking home to finding home among those in their new world.

So where is home for you? What would make you feel a home? Isn’t it time we took a better look from the other person’s point of view and helped to create the setting that offers what is most needed, a place to call my own and people to share it with!