

Utermohlen Response
By Morgan Hussey, Class of 2018

A frightening number of people from all over the world have had experiences or exposure to Alzheimer's disease. Whether through a family member or a friend who suffered, they can still understand the harsh reality of this disease. Until recently, I was fortunate enough to not know any friends or family who were affected by Alzheimer's, but soon after my arrival at college it was clear that I was naïve to the true devastation of Alzheimer's Dementia. Since starting my nursing courses here at Illinois Wesleyan, I have been part of several class discussions and lectures that have expanded my knowledge on the topic of Alzheimer's Dementia. One that helped me learn a lot, was a presentation given at the beginning of this spring semester for a class by a group I was a part of. We were given the task of teaching the rest of our classmates about the way Alzheimer's works and the drugs that can be prescribed to help slow the progression. Going into this presentation, we were looking at the disease from a scientific standpoint. Explaining what was actually happening to the brain that would cause the different symptoms these patients have, or explaining the mechanism that the drugs work by in order to try and prevent the symptoms from progressing too rapidly. Had we not had the opportunity to experience the Utermohlen Exhibit last fall, we might have presented only about the scientific aspects of the disease, but seeing what was expressed in the paintings, we knew that presenting only the scientific perspective would not be enough. William Utermohlen's work was transformative, and it completely shifted my way of thinking about this disease. His pieces allow people the opportunity to see into his mind as it changed due to the progression of this disease. Our professors always stress the idea of caring for a person holistically. What I mean by holistically is that we take into consideration the mind, body, and spirit of a patient when planning how to care for them, and in order to do this we have to consider disciplines that go beyond just nursing and the science of the disease progression or illness in a person's body. These paintings added depth to that final layer of what it meant to understand and care holistically for a patient with Alzheimer's Dementia. Before seeing this exhibit, I never would have thought about the disease or the progression of Alzheimer's the way I do now. It was amazing to see the amount of social isolation and disorientation that he felt so early in his disease progression. This was an eye-opening experience that allowed me, and anyone else who experienced these paintings, to see just how his perspective continued to change as his disease progressed. The beginning paintings were extremely detailed and skillful, but as time went on, each piece began to get more and more disorganized until the very end when even portraits he did of himself were unrecognizable. It seemed as if the paintings were representatives of the deterioration of his mind. By continuing with his paintings during the progression of his disease, William Utermohlen allowed us to gain insight into both his thoughts and feelings. As a nurse, it is vital that we learn how to pay attention not only to what a patient says but also what a patient does not say. These paintings give us the perspective about what a patient might not have said about what he felt before and after his diagnosis, as well as right up until his death. William Utermohlen has effectively shown us a new perspective, a brand new way to see much more deeply into the patient experience of Alzheimer's Dementia. Remember the Alzheimer presentation that I referenced earlier, well the Utermohlen exhibit allowed us to consider aspects of Alzheimer's from several different disciplines into our presentation. We considered the psychologic effects that occur when they lose their identity, and how art can be used to show the progression of and the response to the disease through paintings, sculpture, dance, etc. The

different modalities allowed us to see this disease from several different perspectives and better encompass the true devastation of Alzheimer's dementia. Although we acknowledge that as this disease progresses the person's memories will fade and eventually disappear, there is still a person there and we, as nurses, need to still care for that whole person. Illinois Wesleyan as a liberal arts school has allowed me to expand my way of thinking and better prepare me for my future-nursing career.