

I Reconnected With My Mother by Reconnecting With Nature

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“The trees!” my 90-year-old mother exclaimed, studying the mountainsides of Douglas firs rising toward the periwinkle sky. Her eyes were wide open as she scanned the scene, watching a hawk hover on a thermal. “I’ve always loved the trees.”

We were driving up Route 49, deep in California’s Gold Country north of Nevada City, and I was happy to see her so engaged. Initially, I looked forward to this overnight trip as a chance to escape my family. I had planned to fly from my home in Washington, D.C, to the Bay Area to spend a few days with my parents and sisters, then leave for a night to catch my breath and get some work done, and reenter the abyss.

My mother has dementia. It’s been, well, a challenge. My two sisters live near her and have taken on most of the burden of negotiating the situation with our dad, spending tons of time with them as we figure out how to best take care of her. She’s always been the strong one, and even in her condition, she won’t allow for a caretaker. She refuses to go to the doctor. And our dad does what he always has done: He lets her run the show despite the fact that his wife of 60 years is slowly slipping away.

“You should take Mom with you,” one of my sisters urged. “She loves adventures.” I hesitated. But I saw my dad, his eyes downturned and void of their signature spark. I realized, admittedly with a little bit of guilt, it was my turn. Reluctantly, I agreed.

When I picked her up at their apartment, Mom was packed and ready to go. Normally, it takes her a while to collect her belongings just to go down to the dining room for breakfast. She couldn’t wait to begin our adventure.

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A view from California Gold Country.

“So much traffic,” Mom repeated more than once on our drive north on Interstate 80. “With no wars to keep the population down, there’s so many people. What are we going to do?” As a child, she was a prisoner of war during World War II, and that’s the era most prevalent in her thoughts. She talks endlessly about being a POW, hiding from the Japanese at a German convent before entering the prison camp at Santo Tomas in Manila, eventually being dramatically rescued by General Douglas MacArthur’s 1st Cavalry on February 3, 1945. She will never forget that date.

We had a good conversation too. My mother asked about my work, my husband, our cats — sometimes asking the same question again and again and again. In some ways, it was like being with my old mom, though everything was different.

Our first stop was Nevada City on Route 49, where I wanted to see the National Exchange Hotel, built during the Gold Rush but experiencing a new lease on life with a recent overhaul. We parked along the main street filled with false-fronted buildings, and my mother darted from one to the next, excited to see how the historic city had become contemporary with its wine-tasting rooms, boutiques, and art galleries. “Your father would love it here,” she said cheerily. “We should bring him next time.”

I know my father wouldn’t fathom bringing my mother on a getaway weekend this far from home. Those days are over. My mother views it differently. “I feel locked in the apartment,” she confided in me. “I served my time as a POW.” She is no longer allowed to drive, so she doesn’t have the freedom to visit her friends, at least in her mind. My parents are very active, with my father taking the lead; it’s just she can’t venture out on her own anymore. For that act of love, she calls our sweet dad a dictator and dumps her anger and frustration on him behind closed doors.

We continued north on Route 49, plunging into the craggy beauty of the Yuba River Canyon, the waters sparkling far below. “Do we have enough gas?” my mother asked for the 15th time, a look of panic on her face, not remembering that we had filled up at the start of our journey. Suddenly, she became lost in the beauty around us, forgetting her concern, until it popped up again.

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California’s Yuba River

My mother came alive again when we went for a tour of the defunct Kentucky gold mine in nearby Sierra City. She skipped along the trail. Yes, skipped. She had nothing physically wrong with her. How could her brain be so sick? Then, the reason for her unbridled joy struck me. She spent her first three years at a gold mine near Yreka in Siskiyou County, where her father worked as a gold engineer. They lived in a cabin, probably not far from where we were now, on a meager income.

The richness of the mountains, cool-running streams, and thick stands of trees infiltrated her essence, likely filling her with happy memories. Later on, when her family relocated to the Philippines after my grandfather got a new job as a gold miner, she roamed the hills, collecting snails and hiding from rain beneath large taro leaves.

Everyone says music is a way to calm those with dementia. For my mother, it seemed to be nature. Medical research backs this theory. “The natural environment stimulates the senses — sight, smell, hearing, touch — which can evoke positive memories and emotions,” Alejandro Alva, a psychiatrist and medical director at the Mental Health Center of San Diego,

told me. “This multisensory stimulation is particularly beneficial in dementia care, as it can help in maintaining a connection with the present moment and the environment, fostering a sense of peace and relaxation.”

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Later that evening, after a glorious open-air dinner at the Sierra Pines Resort, where we enjoyed a huge pork chop (her) and rainbow trout (me) accompanied by views of the sunset-hued Sierra Buttes, we stayed in a pine-shaded log cabin at the Yuba River Inn. Mom rushed inside. “I just love it!” she exclaimed. As I unpacked, she stood by the sliding glass doors, peering into the woods. “Maybe we’ll see a bear.”

Fortunately, we didn’t see a bear. And even more fortunately, she slept through the night, something my father says she no longer does at home. The next morning, we drove down the camp’s dirt road to a platform overlooking the Yuba River, where we stood, admiring the beauty of the swaying pines above us and the rushing river below. Her cheeks were pink with enthusiasm as she surveyed the panorama. At that moment, I knew. It was a good idea to bring her here.

On a trip back to California a month later, I was sitting with my husband and parents at Sam’s Chowder House in Half Moon Bay, overlooking the glistening Pacific Ocean. My mother became agitated. Nothing major, but she wasn’t following the conversation and became frustrated. “Are there seals there?” I deftly asked, pointing out the window.

Mom’s attention turned to the majestic natural view, forgetting whatever upset her about our conversation. “I don’t think those are seals, but look at those pelicans,” she exclaimed. On our excursion, I learned that nature is a healing tool with the power to calm my mother. As she fights dementia, we can always point her in the direction of nature and the sense of awe it provides to help her reside in a more peaceful state of mind.

Barbara Noe Kennedy is a freelance journalist specializing in destinations, art, history, culture, food and wine, and social justice. Her work has been featured in National Geographic Traveler, Fodor’s Travel, BBC, Lonely Planet, Southern Living, and The Washington Post. Learn more at barbaranoekennedy.com.