

Mountain Notebook

Nightly Walks With Dad

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One Friday afternoon in February 2024, I attached a visitor badge to my shirt at Santa Barbara's Cottage Hospital. Just two days before, Dad and I had been on a nighttime walk. We'd talked about going on a camping trip together. Now I was navigating to his hospital room.

When I arrived, I could see that he was doing a lot better. At that time, we still didn't know what was wrong with him; he complained of excessive tiredness and a fast heartbeat. He said he was feeling up for a walk, so we took a stroll along the cardiac floor.

These walks became our routine over the next three days of his hospital stay. They were also reminders of the walks we were used to taking, out in the mountains at night. Those walks felt elusive under the fluorescent lights.

Four years ago, in March 2020, my dad and I had started going on nightly walks in the mountains behind my parents' house. He usually went alone, but, jaded by the perpetual lockdown, I jumped at the chance to accompany him.

We walked along a 2.5-mile loop around a lake that winds past fragrant eucalyptus trees and native sedges at the water's edge. My dad first brought me to that lake a decade ago; it's where he taught me how to fish. Days out on the dinghy boat, catching and releasing, are some of my fondest memories with him. Yet while cherished, those days disappeared as quickly as they had begun. I suppose this is my fault. At the apogee of my teenage years, I became more interested in hanging out with my friends.

Walking with him and thinking back to our lake

days, I realized that it had been a long time, too long, since we'd spent *real* quality time together. Maybe these walks would change that, I thought. Maybe we could reforge our connection—like two friends who've spent years apart.

Our conversations were casual at first—how long we thought the lockdown would last and how online school was going for me (surprisingly well). But then I started asking Dad questions about his life—his experiences as a logger in Oregon, how he and my mom met, and memories of the Christmas tree farm we used to have on the ranch, which closed long before I was born. It was my attempt to get to know him better, each story like a puzzle piece forming a clearer picture of Dad's life.

Once, we ushered two runaway cattle back to their pasture and laughed as they moaned like two toddlers who'd been caught misbehaving. Another time, I nearly stepped on a coiled rattlesnake and screamed. Dad maintained his calm demeanor, which seemingly never wavers. I commented on his reaction (or lack thereof). But he's always been like this. He possesses a calmness intrinsic to who he is—a part of him I got to know on our walks.

Night after night, I looked forward to our time together. I started to confide in Dad, bringing along decisions that vexed me. It was on one of our walks that I told him about my interest in journalism and the possibility of getting my master's. "Oh, you *have* to do it," he said to me. On another, a year into my degree program, I told him I wasn't sure I was cut out for it. In response to this, he informed me, "Of course you are," then followed it up with a pep talk telling me why I should never doubt myself.

It felt like I had returned to him on those walks.

For a long time, I'd lived with the comfortable delusion that Dad would always be there, that there would always be time. But as the years flew by, we lost people and animals we loved, which only affirmed the reality that nothing is promised.

One night, shortly after his mother passed away, Dad and I walked. We talked about my grandmother and how we wished we'd spent more time with her. My chocolate Labrador, Mocha, used to walk with us. She died two years ago, but her glow-in-the-dark collar remains hanging on a hook in the garage, in a state of abeyance.

"Remember that we gave her the best life," Dad would say on nights when I commented on the absence of her light guiding us. Whatever regret we carried, whether toward our loved ones or ourselves, we relinquished it during these walks. We focused on the present, and in some ways we altered the future.

The night before my dad's surgery, he walked me to the exit of the cardiac floor. Tears streamed down my face. "Promise me you'll be fine," I commanded him, as if he had control. "I will. Don't worry," he assured me. I was hiccuping now, unable to control my tears. We hugged goodbye.

That Monday, he had a successful catheter ablation to fix his condition, which turned out to be Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, a congenital heart defect.

Dad made a full recovery, and we continued our walks. Those days of uncertainty in the hospital affirmed why we'd initially begun walking: to spend time together. The walks give us something that few parents and children are afforded in this life: a friendship. 🐾