

Monthly newsletter
for people caring for
those affected by
Alzheimer's disease
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dementia.

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Everything Left to Remember

By Steph Jagger

It's a fairly common thing to use past experience and shared memory as a way of connecting with those we love. "Remember when . . ." we say, before launching into a story that might move us to tears or giggles or a feeling of warmth.

Alzheimer's usurps our ability to connect in that way. It blocks the entrance to the past, taking with it a primary mode of connection. The key, at least for me, was to not let that blocked entrance become so large that it also barricaded the present.

That's my biggest tip for those whose lives are being impacted by Alzheimer's - stay present. Focus on the here and now. Allow the things you and your loved one is seeing, hearing, tasting and touching in the moment to be a source of connection.

I learned how to do this with my mom as we drove through the Rocky Mountains. Focusing on the road and the clouds and the bison in the field just over yonder. Focusing on the joy and love and awe we felt in the moment. Knowing, with all of our hearts, that that was enough.

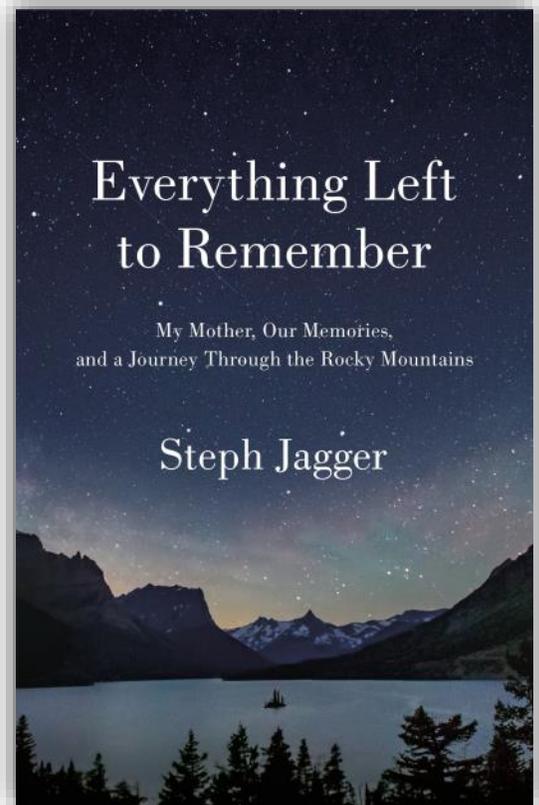
The following is an excerpt from a book I wrote about that very road-trip. It's called *Everything Left to Remember*, and is being heralded as an inspirational mother-daughter memoir that follows two women on a poignant journey through a landscape of generational loss.

I watched my dad pull the car up to the curb at Vancouver International Airport. I saw him peer out the front windshield, looking around until he spotted me. He smiled and waved from inside the car. My mother was sitting in the passenger seat also scanning the area, looking like . . . well, like she didn't know what she should be looking for.

Based on my mother's Alzheimer's progression, meeting in Montana was out of the question. The plan was for me to fly into Vancouver, spend the night with my parents, and then fly with my mom into Bozeman. Our first stop would be Yellowstone National Park.

I motioned for my dad to pop the back gate of the car, and as I loaded my bags I heard him giving a play-by-play to my mom.

"It's Steph," he said. "She's just arrived."



"Where?" she asked.

"Here," he said. "In Vancouver."

"But where's Steph?" she said, with a touch of frustration. My dad pointed to the back of the open car.

"Right there. There she is," he said.

I waved, but my mom wasn't looking. Something in the conversation had hooked onto the synapses inside of her brain. "We're in Vancouver?" she asked, her voice thick with confusion.

How am I supposed to see her as bigger when she is in the midst of disappearing? I thought to myself.

I closed the back gate of the car and took a deep breath. In the handful of weeks since seeing my therapist, I had thought about the promise I'd made, about removing whatever had been built between my mother and me, about seeing her whole. But in this moment, all I could see were the things that were missing. It had only been

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eleven months since her diagnosis, and yet there was already so much less of her.

I opened the side door of the car and slid into the back seat. “Hi, Mom!” I said.

It was almost as if you could hear her brain click into gear. “Oh, I was wondering if that was you!” she said, reaching her hand back to squeeze mine. “You look different. Your hair is so much longer. And darker! When did your hair get so dark?” she asked.

I didn’t look different. My hair was not so much longer. Nor was it anything other than my standard shade of chocolate brown. My mother’s memory of me was shifting. I decided, in that moment, to shift with it.

“Really?” I asked, pulling a section of my hair forward for examination. “Maybe it’s gotten a bit darker this winter.”

“I think so,” she said. “It’s so much darker. It looks pretty.”

She squeezed my hand one more time before continuing on. “Are you just here for the night?” she asked.

“No, Mom,” I said. “We’re going on a trip together. I’m in town to pick you up.”

“We are?” she asked. “You are?”

My dad interjected, “She . . . you and Steph are going camping. Remember? We’ve been talking about it. And we’ve been packing.”

I caught my dad’s eye as he was glancing back at me in the rearview mirror.

“We started laying a few things out,” he said. “But I thought you could help.”

“I sure can,” I said, completely glossing over my concern about just how short-term her short-term memory had gotten. I knew she was beginning to lose things that had happened a month back or even a week prior, but this seemed worse. She didn’t even remember the trip they’d been so recently talking about—a trip that just yesterday, or perhaps that morning, she had started packing for.

This was the new pattern with my mom—a sort of guessing game about her progression, about who she was and where she was in any given moment, about how much she had lost, and what parts of her were left.

And although my father had said it, I was doubtful she needed help packing. This was, after all, the woman who had spent a lifetime making all things luggage look like a competitive sport—knowing

what six people and a slobbering dog would need when traveling, and then being able to jigsaw two weeks’ worth of those items, plus food, water skis, and life jackets, into the back of a VW van before the rise of roof racks.

As it turned out, I was wrong. She did need help with the packing. When we got to the house, I saw that a pair of red jeans, two white cotton turtlenecks, and a red zip-up sweater had been placed on top of the dresser. Beside them were a pair of turquoise, knee-length shorts, black leggings, and a grey wrap.

We repacked. Although she would not relent on the turtlenecks, nor the grey wrap.

“What if I get cold?” she asked, over and over.

“Right,” I said, faking agreement. “Good point.”

I had learned enough in the eleven months since her diagnosis to know that arguing with a person who has Alzheimer’s is as useless as . . . well, as a thin cotton turtleneck in the mountains of Montana. I snuck as much wool clothing into her bag as I could find, as well as a down jacket and vest, before zipping it closed.

After that, I walked down the hall, toward the room where the ladybugs still lived on the sill of the window. This was my childhood home, a place that felt more familiar to me than even myself did—and yet, in that moment, nothing felt familiar. I climbed into the same bed I’d slept in when I was a child, just down the hall from my mother, who in so many ways felt nothing like my mother at all.

What if our story is like Demeter and Persephone’s? I wondered to myself. Only in our version, when Persephone finally returns, she discovers her mother all but gone? What happens then?

Over the past handful of hours I had become filled with doubt that this trip would show me who my mother was. I wondered if I might be too late, if too many shafts and shutters of memory had already closed, if too much was already missing.

For more, search for *Everything Left to Remember* by Steph Jagger at your local library, bookstore or Amazon.com. To hear more from the author, join us for a conversation on May 11th, hosted on Facebook Live - [@alzccentral](https://www.facebook.com/alzccentral).

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