

Why I'm holding on tight to my adult son, when other parents are letting go

By Tanya Frank December 13, 2016

Ann and I lay in bed together, flat on our backs, shoulders and hips touching, with the laptop balanced on my stomach. We swooned over our plan to hike Half Dome in Yosemite National Park, contemplating where to start, where to rest and what to do if the granite got slick in the rain. I squeezed Ann's arm, and told her I was scared — in a good way, a way that made me feel alive.

“Is it one of the wonders of the world? Can you Google it?” I offered, sighing at the idea of being in love with her, and nature, and Yosemite, even though I'd never seen it in person.

My life wasn't always this active. I had immigrated from a council housing estate in London, where I'd rarely walked farther than the local tube station. Arriving in Los Angeles with two preteens and a Bedlington terrier in tow, I'd hardly had time to catch my breath. So when my younger boy, Alex, won a scholarship to a respected local university, I could at last envision a life all my own.

On the day of our planned trip, Ann rented a Volkswagen camper van called Lemoncello. I packed her beer in a cooler, stuffed my Dolly Parton CD into my backpack and was dusting off my hiking boots when Alex appeared. He wasn't due to visit that morning. We hadn't seen him for a while. The last time he stopped by he had seemed withdrawn, and smelled of marijuana.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. Lemoncello was smiling at us with her round headlights and mounted front tire, but her happy-camper look seemed ill-placed. Something was wrong. Alex's eyes were big, and he looked pale and thin in the morning light. He had no shoes on, and his shirt was inside out.

Ann had been watching us from the driver's seat. She jumped out of the van and ushered us into the house.

Alex checked the kitchen as if it were unfamiliar territory. His eyes darted from side to side like a soldier in combat. I had seen that look before, long ago, when I had let him watch [“Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.”](#)

“I think I’m being stalked,” he said. “They’re out to get me.” He moved into the corner between the stove and pantry.

“Who?” I asked. “Who are they?”

“My friends, but they aren’t really my friends,” he answered.

He looked down at his bare feet, unable to make eye contact. “Please don’t go,” he implored.

“Of course not,” I said, without even looking at Ann to see if she would concur. I swallowed hard, and offered Alex a sandwich. He had no appetite — another sign that something was wrong.

I tried to dismiss his classic paranoia symptoms at first, even after they were diagnosed as schizoaffective disorder. Alex was the kid who had written a novel at 13, interviewed an astronomer about black holes and taught himself to play Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3. He was the child who saved his pocket money, who could be trusted with the house key. Now he slept 16 hours a day, and had to quit school.

Alex resisted his classification and refused his antipsychotic medication, believing he had been poisoned, bugged, hacked and monitored by the FBI, CIA and Russian Mafia. His defensiveness had a name — anosognosia — an impaired awareness linked to the condition.

Although it was Alex’s memory, executive function and impulse control that were affected, it was my time, finances and autonomy that were swallowed whole. I became caregiver, social worker, administrator, counselor, advocate, nurse, dietitian and researcher, when all I wanted to be was Mum.

I mined my memory for what had caused Alex’s disease. To fix him, I had to know what had broken. But my search was futile. His winter-spring birth into an urban environment and my perinatal depression were hailed as risk factors. Then there was my mollicoddling. Psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann called overprotective mothers like me schizoprogenic, suggesting that we bore healthy children, but with our own psychological problems, had essentially driven them mad.

Despite my clinginess, I was lonely, and social media reinforced my isolation. I tracked Alex’s friends as they graduated, moved on, drifted away. I saw photos of them diving off the shores of Bali, and working on permaculture projects in Europe. Their parents had transitioned as well, feathering their empty nests with ski trips to Austria and gallant volunteer projects.

Ann and I had dreams, too, although we didn’t post them on Facebook. We wanted to travel, to build a tiny house in the Santa Cruz Mountains where we could live a simple, scaled-down life. But we had to protect Alex. So bit by bit we laid down foundations for his future: a special needs trust, a suitable accommodation that would support him, a conversation with our elder son, who would step into our shoes one day.

Finally, during a more stable period for Alex, Ann and I mustered the strength to leave for that long-awaited trip to Yosemite. It wasn't easy; I was fatter and slower from years of care-taking, and I worried about being so far away from my boy.

Ann held my hand on the steepest parts of our hike. The climb pulled at my calf muscles, and it took the breath from my lungs, but it gave me something: Hope. Yosemite was a place of regeneration. Fresh green saplings were taking root in the recently scorched soil of the Meadow Fire in 2014. They reminded me of Alex, and my belief that he, too, could start over again. Of all the concepts I had researched over the years, it was neuroplasticity — the brain's capacity to reorganize itself through the formation of new neural connections — that gave me faith.

We were quiet on our way back down the mountain, the reality of returning to our daily lives already starting to set in.

“Did we ever establish whether this was one of the wonders of the world,” I asked, at the base of the mountain. “Did you Google it?”

“No, I don't think I did,” Ann said.

I immediately realized the folly of my question. It didn't matter what Google said. Yosemite was a wonder of the world for me. I reeled Ann into my chest, as if she were a prize catch that I didn't want to lose. I was grateful for her, and Alex, and all the steep and beautiful ups and downs in our world.

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