

Longing for home: Aging and the promises of God

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [Patrick Q](#)

My parents, 88 and 89, celebrated their 62nd wedding anniversary by sharing a milkshake at the Union Dairy in Freeport, Illinois (rated 4.5 stars on yelp.com), which they had frequented when they were in their twenties. They seem to have followed each other almost lockstep in the aging process. Until recently they'd go down the hall of their assisted-living facility to the dining room together, both with walkers. Mom, who has settled into dementia in the last four years, would inevitably comment on how slow Dad was moving, although he was right behind her. "He's getting so *old*," she'd say, putting him at 78.

In the dining room, Dad would point out which resident was currently spending lots of time with a resident of the opposite sex. We joked that Dad could write a weekly gossip sheet for the community, while Mom, who often meandered through the hallways of their apartment complex, could distribute it.

They seldom get out for a milkshake now or go outside at all for that matter. Dad was weakened by a crisis in blood pressure, and now he doesn't leave his wheelchair without help. He is more confused now, too, although the confusion alternates with sweet moments of clarity.

Because of these changes, and because Mom was turning up too often in other residents' apartments (more hints of scandal), they moved from a two-room apartment to separate rooms in the full-care section of the building. Their old apartment is only a five-minute trip, down an elevator and through two hallways, but for my folks that apartment might as well be in Asia. It's been added to a collection of remembered homes. Both of them confuse their childhood homes with their homes in the various communities they lived in and with the apartment they've just left.

It's hard for me to watch as particular places and memories—an Easter egg hunt in Palos Heights planned by the grandkids, or a birthday dinner in Rockford ending with Duchess Cream pineapple dessert (a favorite of my dad's)—become a blur for them. My mom asked me in all innocence, "Have I ever been to your house?"

It's as if all of their homes have merged into one great longing: "I'd like to be home." "I'm hoping that I'll be going home tomorrow." One day a nurse's aide dialed my brother in Minnesota for Mom. Usually calm and easy to please, she was on this occasion anxious and insistent, telling him that she'd decided to "go home," meaning in this case to the farm near Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, where she spent her childhood.

"I'll hitchhike!" she threatened. When my brother asked her if she was kidding, she said, "Yes—about the hitchhiking."

For Mom, everyone who ever was with her in her life is alive now. For the rest of us, her virtual reality is sometimes hilarious. On the drive home from a family reunion, Mom kept referring to "Cousin Tom." "Didn't he look great?" she insisted. "Did you see Tom? Did you see him?" Everyone in the car was quiet for a while, until my dad spoke up, offering a response that's now part of the family humor treasury. "He's *dead*, Ruth! Cousin Tom's dead!"

Sometimes the references are painful and even unnerving. One never knows who's coming to visit. "How's my mom?" says my mom. "She must be getting up there in years."

"Yes, she sure is," I've learned to answer. (She'd be about 130.) "And she's just fine." At such moments I miss my grandmother, as well as Cousin Tom and an entire reunion full of other relatives.

Then there's the day my dad struggled to come out of a mental fog that had taken him "home" to see his parents. "Is Dad here?" he asked pleadingly as he woke up.

"He may very well be here with you in spirit, Dad," I said, fumbling for his hand as well as for the right response. "He's been on my mind too." At that moment my longing for both father and grandfather were merged into one. Why, just this once, I thought irrationally, couldn't Grandpa show up for my dad—and for me. This almost-gathering of family saints brings them back from mere memory and yet leaves them locked in absence. Having them for only a few seconds makes me weep anew for the loss of them.

In my Dad's files I found directions he has written for his memorial service. Hoping for comfort, I looked up one of the scripture passages he'd chosen. It was John 14:23: "Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.'" I realized then that I don't need to find the right, longed-for home among all those we've known on earth, however sweet the memories of it are.

And if I don't fully understand home, I have been given and do understand generous, unrestrained love. I revisit the memories of moments that gave me intimations of that love, like the camping trips when Dad would sing to us kids a silly tune in falsetto while Mom tried to restrain him with a disapproving, "Ken!" I remember once how Dad was boring us with a serious, pastoral-type reflection by the campfire when his camp chair collapsed and left him sitting on the ground—a moment we love to retell. The telling is loving too. Those stories, along with the moments when I grasp my dad or mom's hand and affirm the promise of God in Christ coming to them and to me, ease the way toward peace and soften the strain and sadness of these days.