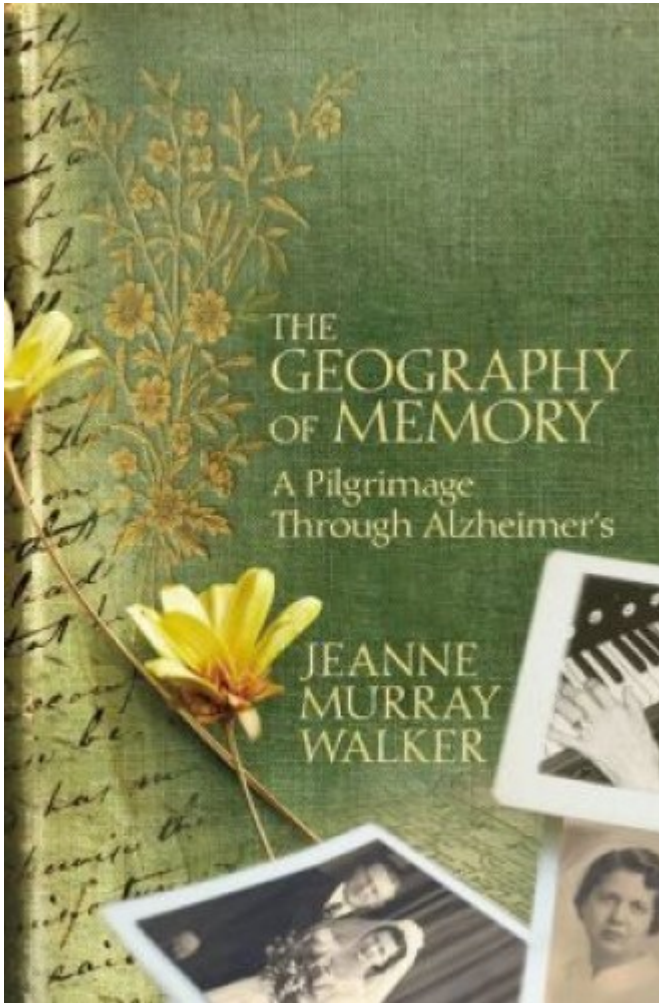


Holding on and letting go

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Geography of Memory

By Jeanne Murray Walker

Center Street

The title *The Geography of Memory* gives no hint of the rich content in this volume, and the subtitle *A Pilgrimage Through Alzheimer's* is downright scary. Been there (both my parents had Alzheimer's), done that (I was in charge of their care for seven

challenging years), did not get the T-shirt (is there one?).

Still, I was eager to read Jeanne Murray Walker's account of her mother's last years. Though the aging-parent memoir has become a crowded genre now that most boomers' parents are over 80, I suspected that Walker—a published poet, the author of plays that have actually seen footlights, and a professor of English at the University of Delaware—would see senescence through a fresh lens. I was not disappointed.

The story opens with a midnight phone call in 2008 delivering the news that Walker's mother, Erna, has died at age 93. Walker and her husband are in Paris, and Erna is 5,000 miles away, in Dallas. Walker and her sister, Julie, had been caring for their mom for ten years.

Erna's freezer had been Walker's first clue that something was amiss. When she opened it in search of ice, several packages of ham spilled out onto the floor. Walker's mother never ate ham. It seemed unlikely that she would eat the two giant roasts or the whole goose, either. This looked "like a freezer owned by a mother on another planet," Walker writes. Later that day, looking in a desk drawer for paper, Walker discovered a tangle of office supplies, letters, coupons, photos and unpaid bills. Her mother had "always been obsessively clean and orderly," to the point of lining up paper clips in rows. What was going on?

To anyone who has taken care of someone with dementia, the answer is obvious—Walker's mother's brain was deteriorating, whether because of Alzheimer's, strokes or some other process. Why else would she forget about a party she'd been helping to plan, or lose the tax records needed by her accountant, or miss appointments because she mixed up the days of the week? And why else would she come up with clever ways to compensate so that most people—including her primary care physician—would not suspect anything was wrong?

The story's trajectory is sadly predictable. Erna's condition deteriorated. Her daughters joined forces (and sometimes squabbled) as they tried to care for her, often against her wishes. Erna moved from a bungalow to an assisted-living apartment to a room in the Alzheimer's unit. The daughters were at their wits' end. Erna died.

If this were the whole story, *The Geography of Memory* would quickly lapse into obscurity along with all those other boomer memoirs. But Walker's book stands out

for several reasons.

For one, the writing is superb. Walker wields a mean metaphor and uses telling details to create scenes and depict characters. See her at age ten, a lonely child at church camp for the first time, falling in love with “a greenish plastic cross”:

It’s about the width of a table knife and the height of a Popsicle stick, and it is affixed to a rawhide string. I stand at the display table staring at it, keeping myself very still. I can feel my heartbeat in my wrists, which dangle at my sides. In the stifling Nebraska summer afternoon, a trickle of sweat runs down my stomach. I cannot believe how beautiful the cross is. A little placard explains that it glows in the dark.

Another appealing feature of Walker’s book is its delicate balance between realism and optimism. Yes, Erna has her quirks, and they increase as she gets older. Yes, trying to meet her needs from 1,500 miles away is worrying, frustrating and exhausting, and cooperating with the sister who lives near Erna in Dallas can stir up latent sibling rivalry. But Walker depicts her mother, her sister and the other characters, whom she clearly loves, with respect and compassion. She even finds something to like about dementia: “I learned that to stay and struggle through Alzheimer’s is to reap gifts that may not come any other way.”

The story of these gifts, however, is not much like the strength-through-suffering trope typical of most survivor memoirs. These are gifts of understanding. “Mother, like all of us, carried her former selves inside her, almost as if they were characters in a play,” Walker writes. “As she verged into dementia, her earlier selves came and went at will.” Instead of dismissing her mother’s often bizarre comments as nonsense, Walker learned to figure out which version of her mother was speaking, to understand her words as metaphor, and to apply their meaning to her present circumstances.

While coming to understand her mother’s speech, Walker also deepened her understanding of her own history. Paradoxically, as her mother’s memory grew more and more jumbled, Walker’s memory sprang to life. Returning with her mother to the past, she relived events she had never fully processed: her father’s untimely death from heart disease, her teenage brother’s death from unknown causes, her feelings of alienation from a family that didn’t understand her interests or values.

The decade of needing to remember earlier times gave me an opportunity to retrace the stages of my teenage battle against my smart, valiant mother, to discover how oddly like her I am, too, how much of what she told me I was trying to pass on to my own children. That realization is one of the unexpected gifts that Alzheimer's brought.

Halfway through the book, I finally got it: this isn't just a tale about an elderly parent or a frazzled caregiver. It is also, and equally, a coming-of-age story, and Walker's deft juxtaposition of her own story with her mother's is its genius. These are my roots, Walker is saying: my wacky, indomitable, paranoid mother; my family's fundamentalist church, full of answers and rules but also full of love. And this is me: a reader, a scholar, a questioner, an Episcopalian, a Democrat—everything my community of origin is not. Walker muses that her mother probably “wondered what kind of a creature she was raising.” Yet even as the young Jeanne rebelled against her mother's deepest values, her mother “hung on to her beliefs and her people with one hand and on to [her defiant daughter] with the other.”

With *The Geography of Memory*, Walker has returned the favor. As a teenager she couldn't wait to get away from her mother, and her mother couldn't bear to let her go. Fifty years later she writes, “Now the tables are turned. Now I am giving my mother permission to go. Now I see how terribly difficult it is, that kind of letting go, how a person can say it and still not believe it.”

As clear-eyed and unsentimental as its title, Walker's memoir is nevertheless a moving story about mothers, daughters, love and, ultimately, God. “Life is short,” her priest told her, “and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So be swift to love, make haste to be kind, live without fear. Your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you as a mother.”