

## Big Basin or Two Reasons for Couples Therapy

Mardith J. Louisell

I was sure my partner and I needed therapy. Certainly I have faults, but the night before we left for a long weekend, I lay in bed concentrating on his. I had two major complaints. I didn't know when, but sometime during our three-day weekend I knew he would give me the opportunity to point them out.

I like to get out on weekends, but he prefers to sit on the couch and watch PBS mysteries. When he finally agreed to go away, I pulled out my newspaper clippings and he pulled out his. He talked eight-hour drives; I thought two. He wanted dark redwoods; I wanted ocean light. He wanted to stay outside, snap photos, and eat trail mix. I wanted a comfortable place to read, hike a little, and eat pumpkin risotto. Soon, I was ready to abandon the whole trip and spend the money on therapy, but I knew he wouldn't split the cost. He'd rather spend the money on a fourth hard drive for his computer.

Nevertheless, on a Thursday afternoon he pointed the car south toward California's Big Basin Redwoods State Park. Big Basin because its three waterfalls were rated "9" by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and, since it had been raining for months, they would be obscenely full. Big Basin because he can make up his mind and I can't.

It always happens like this. I vacillate and suddenly, instead of being on a plane to Paris, we are on Highway 101 heading north to camp in northern California's marijuana-infested redwood groves. The last night on that trip, he placed himself in a slight depression on the ground and the pouring rain pooled directly under him, soaking his back while I slept, dry and comfortable. I wasn't exactly glad he was wet, but it *was* satisfying.

Who cares about waterfalls—harsh hikes with unforgiving inclines? And then there was his cold. Why go hiking when he's sick and hacking every few minutes? Even when he's healthy he lags behind, always trailing by 10 feet.

"I hope you're not going to be angry," he said, halfway down the coast, "because I'm still coughing a lot."

It was true. I do get irritated by things that are seemingly not his fault. But I couldn't help but think he could do more about his cough. Everyone else had a cold or the flu but he insisted his cough didn't require rest. "What makes you special?" I asked.

“I have post-nasal drip,” he said. “It’s a sinus issue, not a cold. Only colds require rest.”

I thought we would stay on the coast at a lodge, rustic but with full amenities. Instead we ended up at a motel painted resort red that looked like a converted Boy Scout camp. Our cabin smelled of disinfectant and drooped in the constant rain. No one would be delivering ricotta pancakes dripping with raspberry coulis, but he said we couldn’t afford the extra hour it would take to get from the coast to the park, “We need the time to see all three waterfalls.”

Once inside the park, I worried about the 10-mile, six-hour hike, categorized as “strenuous.” We were out of shape, and his post-nasal drip made him cough like a snorting mountain lion. “Everything doesn’t have to be mapped out,” I told myself. “If it doesn’t work, we’ll turn around. Just like I don’t have to know how our therapy discussion will go; we can turn back if it doesn’t work.”

10:30 a.m. Showers forecast, path muddy with yesterday’s rain. Ferns glom to the trunks of redwoods, Douglas firs, tan oaks, and every rock or wood surface handy. The heavy net of green, mysterious, like the inside of an algae-covered aquarium. On the path, tufts of dislodged celadon moss float like spider webs. The creek sloshes, gurgles, rustles, roars, and cranks out every other sound torrential water can make when rain has slammed into it for the past five months.

11:30. He tells me a friend is in relationship therapy. Hmm. I let that hang in the humid air for a minute.

“I was thinking we need to go to therapy,” I say off-handedly. Whenever I say we need to talk about our relationship or hint that friends find time to take romantic getaways, he says he feels pretty good about the relationship.

“For what?”

“For two reasons.”

“I feel pretty good about our relationship,” he said. “What are your reasons?”

“Well, I can only think of one reason right now,” I say, “and I can’t tell you that until I can think of the other.”

Noon. Only three people pass us in an hour and a half. We dip, climb, dip, and climb. What was my second complaint? Don’t force it, I tell myself as I look at him, it will come.

12:30. Why was I hiking? Why wasn’t I reading in an upscale hotel room beside a vase of yellow and white tulips? Do I even like hiking? As a child I walked with my dad in the summer rain but I didn’t start hiking until I was 27 years old and lived in a rain forest on Vancouver Island. There, I hiked alone in the rain from the beach to the small fishing

village of Ucluelet to call my brother on his wedding day. Hiking back, I was sure I heard a mountain lion.

1:00. We ford the 15th small lake of rain water and the balls of my feet burn. It's annoying that he wades straight through the pools of water, while I, trying to keep my shoes dry, tiptoe on logs and drop farther and farther behind. "Use your time well," I tell myself. "Think about five-year life goals." But in the dark of the 1,500-year-old redwoods, life goals seem inconsequential.

1:30. Waterfalls. The first, Silver Falls, plummets in a thin diaphanous spray. The second, a few minutes later, is Golden Cascade, higher, fuller, more like a curtain. We find a place far enough from its roar to eat the lunches we packed. Our salad of raw broccoli and onion reminds me I read that raw vegetables can be poisonous. His tofu is good but my cheese and tomato sandwich is mushy and filled with bitter, yellowing cabbage. "Why is there cabbage in a cheese sandwich?" I wonder, and curse the town's neo-hippie health food store.

2:00. Berry Creek Waterfall, the third, loveliest, most symmetrical, and most photographed. At the bottom, a lovely pool and bench surrounded by ferns and spray. At the top, a wide rock precipice, cascading water. Then, halfway down the 70-foot drop, two boulders divide the stream, which parts and then rejoins. A successful therapy.

3:00. Drizzle. We head back. In the dark of a March rain, redwoods are ominous. I plod slowly and carefully and he slipshods along. A ghostly green scrim settles between the woods and us so it seems we're walking through the same exquisite scene over and over, stepping forward but not covering any distance.

The rain drenches our shirts and we speed up for a minute but our legs say slow down. I climb up the hills in front of him because his knees strain; coming down he walks in front because of mine. I do deep breathing to keep my feet moving and wonder how many mountain lions this stretch of redwoods supports.

3:30. "My oxygen levels have always been low," he says. He's had two open heart surgeries. Is he implying he could drop dead? I consider this. I look at his hunched posture, which I have mentioned to him a few times before. "Perhaps if you straighten up," I suggest, "you could get higher oxygen levels."

4:00. Baby toe blistered, every step painful, sit on wet and decaying redwood stump. Hard rain, glasses fogged, jeans wet.

6:00. He thinks he sees a shortcut. Is he right? Could it be a mistake that will take us even longer? I follow him; it saves 15 minutes! I am so grateful I forget the cough, the oxygen levels, his splattering through puddles.

6:30. Cold and soaked but rejuvenated by seeing my car in the parking lot, we arrive back at the trailhead. "We could have done even another hour," I say, "Don't you think?"

At the motel, endorphinic and quiet, we showered, rinsed shoes, stretched, napped, and watched two gardeners on BBC solve a mystery. At midnight, he stopped coughing and I listened to the rain slapping onto the roof and into the river.

To return to San Francisco the next day, we looped around to Pacific Coast Highway 1. At Half Moon Bay, he pointed out a hotel where we had stayed 10 years before. “How did we end up there?” I asked. “It’s not like you to stay in a hotel only 20 minutes from home.”

“It was when we first went out,” he said. “I was trying to show you I knew a thing or two.”

The coast did have more light—from the sun and because the expanse of the Pacific, even on a gray day, creates its own light as water droplets scramble in the air.

We drove up to Pacifica and ate at an upscale diner. The portions were large and the prices reasonable, but it wasn’t the pumpkin risotto for which I would have happily paid four times as much.

Still, driving north to San Francisco, I was smiling. He said, “I was worried you wouldn’t have a good time.”

Why would he think that?

It’s true Big Basin wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but I’m not sure what that was. It wasn’t pumpkin risotto, books, and chocolate, but it was an escape. I hadn’t thought about the fight I would have with AOL when I canceled my service, my two reports overdue by a month, or my chain-smoking downstairs neighbor pounding on her ceiling with a broom handle. I had wanted a peak experience that would lift me to a new world. Failing that, I at least wanted to come back a different person, someone not constantly irritated, who knew where she wanted to go and went. Big Basin wasn’t that, but I learned the difference between the trunk of a Douglas fir and that of a redwood. I walked under 200-foot-high canopies that filtered the light to emerald green. Our 10-mile hike generated endorphins that produced a mood as blissful as chocolate.

And I still can’t remember the second reason we needed therapy.