

How salmon fishing helped me embrace my Alaska Native identity

A life-changing revelation by my estranged mother when I was 26 led me on a quest for family, heritage and self

By Kate Nelson

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Photo credit: Kate Nelson

Having spent most of my life in Minnesota, I never could have imagined that I'd feel most like myself fishing in the Pacific waters off the south-east [Alaska](#) coast.

It was an uncharacteristically warm August, one of the best times of the year to hook a salmon. But it still felt chilly to me, even in head-to-toe rain gear, as compared with Minnesota's hot and humid summers. After a few days angling off the Alaska Panhandle, I had gotten the hang of battling with a feisty king salmon on the end of the line, but then I hooked something entirely different. It felt like I was hauling a gargantuan up from the depths of the sea.

My boat mates laughed as I struggled to bring the fish in. That is, until they saw it was a "barn door" halibut, the apt name given to oversized forms of the flatfish. Our guide, who had now jumped to attention, could tell it was a female based on its size and explained we would release it back into the wild to help maintain the population. I had never seen a fish of that magnitude – some 6ft long and likely 200lbs in weight – let alone caught one.

I was no stranger to fishing. In fact, out on the water was one of the few places I felt at peace with myself and the world around me during my Minnesota upbringing. Fishing with my family taught me to have reverence for nature, optimism about future prosperity and patience for what was to come. The methodical ritual of baiting the hook, casting the line out into the mirror-like lake, waiting for that telling tug and reeling in the bounty was almost instinctual. Of course, catching pint-sized perch and sunfish couldn't have prepared me for hooking a behemoth from the bottom of the ocean.

I wouldn't fully grasp the significance of that Alaska fishing excursion until years later, but even in the moment, I felt a knowing familiarity and a deep connection to the experience.

And it all started with an email four years earlier.

Upon seeing an unexpected email pop up from my estranged mom in 2012, I contemplated leaving it unread. But I couldn't resist the subject line – "I want you to know this" – which piqued both my curiosity and my skepticism. Had my mom discovered the meaning of life as an expat in Ecuador? Was she finally ready to talk about my upbringing after years of silence? Did this epiphany even have anything to do with me?

My childhood had left deep scars due to my parents' alcoholism, depression and codependency. My sister and I spent our days escaping into the fantasy world of our imaginations and our nights wondering if our parents would be too drunk to feed us dinner. Of course, trauma is far from straightforward. My most painful memories are inextricably intertwined with joyful ones, like gardening and making art with my mom and hunting and fishing with my dad.

Our dysfunctional, disheveled household had long been a well-kept family secret – and the impetus for our estrangement as adults. Now, my mom was about to reveal another secret. "I made a decision at one time that I am neither proud nor ashamed of," she wrote. "I had an affair before you were born." That's when my entire understanding of myself, then nearly 27 years in the making, began to unravel.

She explained that my late dad was not, in fact, my biological father. Instead, she told me, my birth father was an Alaska Native man she'd had an affair with back in the 1980s, when my parents spent a stint living in the picturesque [Inside Passage](#) town of [Ketchikan](#), where I'd been born.

While this sudden disclosure validated my lifelong feelings of otherness – having grown up in rural northern Minnesota as an olive-skinned, dark-eyed, chubby-cheeked kid attempting to blend into an ocean of blonde-haired, blue-eyed classmates – it also completely shattered my precarious sense of self.

Throughout my midwestern upbringing, I had fought an ongoing battle to prove just how normal (read: white) I was. Our small-town neighbors couldn't pinpoint my precise background but seemed to know I wasn't one of them. When asked where I was from or what I was (a frequent occurrence), I would spout my

rehearsed explanation: I was of English, Danish and Dutch descent and I tanned well, just like my mom's mom. It was an exhausting exercise in attempting to convince others – and, if I'm being honest, myself – of who I was.

Instead of typing out the irate reply to my mom that first came to mind, I wrote my response with calculated caution. If I pissed her off, I'd never uncover my truth. My ludicrously calm email thanked her for disclosing this information and outlined a dozen questions about how she met this man, what he was like, if I resembled him. She answered what she could in a brief, matter-of-fact paragraph – and that was that. We haven't communicated since. I flashed back to my childhood and wondered: could my life have been entirely different?

From there, I was left to decide what to do with this newfound knowledge. Through some Google sleuthing, I discovered I had some half siblings and likely belonged to a tribe called [Tlingit](#), a word I wasn't even sure how to pronounce at first glance (it's "KLING-kuht"). Still in disbelief, I did three at-home DNA tests for good measure, which revealed nearly identical results showing that I am indeed of Indigenous American descent.

I thought of my dad, the man who raised me. I was a college freshman when he was found dead in 2004 at our modest lakefront cabin near Bemidji, Minnesota. In the months before, I had let his phone calls go unanswered, unable to handle his ceaseless pessimism. Upon learning of his passing, I felt a simultaneous sense of guilt, sorrow and relief. He had gone into a downward spiral after my mom filed for divorce two years earlier and, at just 58, ultimately lost his battle with alcoholism.



Photo credit: Kate Nelson

The loss was two-fold, of both my dad and our cabin, a place that served as the backdrop for so many of my favorite memories. It's where he and I spent summers fishing, one of the few activities that helped us bond. I remember digging under logs for nightcrawlers and soaking in the endless sunlight out on the boat. We'd reel in perch, sunfish and the occasional walleye to be cleaned, pan fried and devoured that same evening. All those happy moments enjoying Minnesota's wild bounty would forever be tainted with the knowledge that this was where my dad met his demise.

Receiving this news that I wasn't his child – eight years after his death – triggered an existential crisis that left me paralyzed with anger, shame and grief. At first, I did my best to ignore all of it. I hid behind what white-passing privilege I can access. I thought of myself unkindly: a bastard child, a half-breed, an unwanted Other. But concealing my truth was literally making me

sick; I was plagued by insomnia, drained of energy and susceptible to every little illness in the air.

I realized I had to do something – I had to return to my birthplace.

In 2016, 31 years into knowing one identity, I mustered up the courage to make the pilgrimage to Alaska to find myself. I tracked down my brother Ric, who is three decades my senior. Much to my amazement, he not only believed me but supported me in my journey of self-discovery. He revealed that he too had experienced separation from family and wanted to help me however he could. He even subjected himself to a DNA test, which proved we were half siblings.

Before my trip, Ric confronted our father, who denied I was his daughter. This didn't come as a surprise, as my mom had explained he'd done the same when he met me during my infancy. Ric wasn't sure if he could convince my birth father to meet me but affirmed he was excited to meet his sister.

Having grown up fighting for my parents' attention and affection, I was taken aback by Ric's unconditional support and uncensored honesty. Yet despite our positive exchanges, a wave of panic washed over me as my plane touched down in Ketchikan. I wasn't sure I was ready to rewrite my personal history, but there was no turning back now.

When I first met Ric at a local cafe a few days later, he was visibly shaking with anticipation. He then immediately took me into his arms, his home and his life. He gave me a tour around town, pointing out where I was born, where he grew up and where various relatives, including my birth father, lived. He even located the house that my family had inhabited decades before, and I got to walk through those same spaces where the few photographs from my infancy had been taken. I thought maybe I would serendipitously encounter my birth father during my week in Ketchikan, a small community of about 8,000. But I never did.

In addition to explaining our own family's complicated history, Ric gave me a crash course in all things Tlingit. I witnessed [master carver Nathan Jackson](#) at work on a totem pole. I marveled at the intricate beadwork adorning elk hide moccasins. I snacked on so-called "[salmon candy](#)" jerky caught, cured and smoked by my own family.

All of these experiences left me awestruck at the deep, meaningful traditions of my people yet overwhelmed that I knew so little about my ancestry. Where I had naively hoped for a comfortable homecoming, I instead felt like a tourist admiring a foreign culture. Was I destined to be a stranger in my birthplace, an outsider in my own existence?

This cloud of uncertainty hovered over me as I embarked on an Alaska Native rite of passage: salmon fishing. I wondered if it would be similar to all the freshwater fishing I'd done growing up. As our floatplane took off for nearby [Prince of Wales Island](#), I felt a familiar combination of excitement and trepidation return. But then the unadulterated beauty of [Tongass National Forest](#) – the world's largest intact temperate rainforest at nearly 17m acres –

unfolded below. That's when it hit me: my history was about so much more than just me.



Photo credit: Kate Nelson

It was out on a boat chasing after chinook (and hooking that barn door halibut) that I finally started to feel at home in my heritage. Sure, the surrounding scenery was certainly different from that of my childhood fishing excursions, with majestic bald eagles prowling for food, friendly whales showing off for us and the occasional enterprising sea lion stealing our catch. But unlike everything that had felt so foreign in recent days, this was something I absolutely knew how to do.

I felt a simultaneous connection to my Indigenous and European ancestors, who both relied on fishing for subsistence and survival. My Native forebears had done this for eons before me, long before my childhood when I spent so many hours angling on Minnesota's 10,000 lakes. But for many Alaska Natives, fishing isn't just a beloved pastime – it's a way of life, with the summer harvest being carefully preserved to sustain families through the long winter. Salmon in particular represents much more than simply sustenance; in Tlingit tradition, it is considered a sacred human-like being worthy of deep respect.

Each evening, we feasted on freshly caught, simply prepared salmon, halibut and rock fish – much like the perch, sunfish and walleye I'd savored during my youth. It was at once a familiar and wholly new taste.

Even after my return to Minnesota, Ric remained the life preserver I so desperately needed. He has continued to teach me about Tlingit life and even helped me get enrolled in my tribe. His unwavering kindness, I now realize, reflects Tlingit values about the importance of family. I'm forever grateful for finding my clan after trauma tore my nuclear family apart.



Photo credit: Kate Nelson

It would take another few years, a global pandemic and a racial reckoning that rippled out from my hometown of Minneapolis for me to truly embrace my identity. During that time, my birth father died, and with him went any hope of developing a relationship. Instead, I have gotten to know other newfound relatives, who have shared their stories about him. By all accounts, he was charismatic, driven, stubborn and complex – traits he passed down to me.

Where I once held so much anger and shame, I now try to hold grace and compassion. For my estranged mom, who chose to protect herself and her family from the turmoil the truth might cause. For my late dad, who did his best to love me despite his demons. For my late birth father, who faced ongoing discrimination throughout his lifetime and was no doubt affected by intergenerational trauma. And for myself, as I navigate a new existence as the person I have always been: a strong Tlingit woman who comes from a long line of strong Tlingit women.

In discovering more about my ancestry, I have come to understand how [Indigenous peoples](#) across Turtle Island have been deeply impacted by displacement, dispossession and disconnection from their traditional life ways – the long-lasting result of colonialism, oppression and forced assimilation. The undeniable parallel to my own decades-long displacement makes me feel less alone on my journey of healing, as does the kinship of countless Native teachers who have shared their wisdom with me.

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And yet, I have so much to learn and so many unanswered questions: did my dad know I wasn't his biological daughter? Did my birth father know I was his? How might life have been different had I been better connected to my Tlingit heritage at an earlier age?

Even today, I'm still hit with waves of feeling “not Native enough”, an enduring effect of colonialist constructs about Indigeneity and a common phenomenon among younger generations who have grown up away from their tribal

traditions. When imposter syndrome creeps in, I think back to that fishing excursion during my first pilgrimage to Ketchikan.

I also endeavor to eat the foods of my people – salmon, crab, berries and more – knowing that these culturally relevant flavors nourish my body, spirit and sense of self. I take comfort knowing that my ancestors handed down traditions, like harvesting salmon and halibut to feed their families, so I too could experience them. And I remind myself that although I came of age thousands of miles away from my tribe's ancestral homelands, like so many Alaska Natives, I grew up learning to live in harmony with the world around me.

Read the article [online](#).