

# When Seeking Social Distancing Almost Caused Tragedy

by David Parker

Dorothy and I have been hikers and campers since before we met as graduate students at U.C. Berkeley in 1970. We married in 1971. In the years that we have been with each other, we have taken several hundred camping and hiking trips together. When we met, we often shared wilderness back-pack trips lasting for at least a week or so, mainly in California, Wisconsin, and Colorado but also in Europe, India, and Nepal. Since 1996, when we bought a 22-foot converted Dodge Ram camper van, we have almost always hiked and then slept overnight in the van.

Recently we decided to take a 5- or 6-day trip into a remote area, Long Valley Campground near the Chimney Peak Wilderness in the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. We had been to this site at least three times earlier and had enjoyed it much, but each previous time we had gone in either the spring or the fall. This time, we set out in late July, when it is hot in the day and cool at night.

I need to mention that I am now 88 years old and Dorothy is 81. We came to the wilderness partly because of covid-19, craving to be in a different environment without the danger of encountering many other people.

Our chosen campground provided secure social isolation, we thought. Its widely-spaced campsites were ordinarily all empty because they could be reached only by driving 30 miles on twisty, one-lane dirt roads along steep slopes. There was no cell phone reception for miles, but we did not realize that.

Another attraction of Long Valley was a rugged canyon path leading for 2-3 miles to the South Fork of the Kern River, which has water year-round. On the evening of our arrival, I took a short hike down the trail and recognized it well, having been there most recently in 2016.

The next morning, I wanted to go further along the trail, possibly to the Kern River, but Dorothy wished to rest in the camp. I quickly set out alone at 9:30 AM. I did not progress as rapidly as I had on earlier visits, which had been in October and not in July heat. By 1:30 PM, I was very near the river, but decided that if it took me four hours to get that far, it made no sense to spend any more time before returning to the van because the sunset was at about 8:00 PM.

All went well initially, but when only about a mile or so was left, I think, the trail became indistinct, and I was having trouble

finding it. I remember thinking that it was possible that I had taken a trail to the wrong canyon and noticed another trail to my left. I made the decision to try the other canyon. After following the canyon to my left for quite a distance, I realized that it was not the correct canyon, but decided to climb to the top of the right-hand side, to see what I might see from there.

I was amazed and surprised! I could make out two structures that were near the start of the trail from our campsite, just -across the canyon in front of me. I had found the correct canyon! I was ecstatic! All I had to do was go down the steep (!) hill I stood at the top of and then climb up the same type of hill on the other side and I would be within a few hundred yards of our camper! This was at only 6:30 PM. It was still uncomfortably hot, and unfortunately, I carelessly veered too far downstream as I descended the hill, because I sought areas with pine trees, so I could get shade once in a while.

To make a long story short, I could not locate the trail that I had seen from across the way and was searching for it as night began to fall at 8:30. By 9:30 my teeth began to chatter, and I was in a situation I had never been in before. I had a light pack and had carried four

20-ounce bottles of water, a sandwich, some beef jerky, and a few granola bars. Not much. I wore a light T shirt, shorts, hat, socks, and hiking boots. That's it!

For a long time, I kept checking my watch every 5 or 10 minutes and wondered how I would make it through the night as it got colder. (We were at 5100 feet of elevation.) I was in a spot that had large stones with patches of sand between them and tried to lie down on the sand. My legs were tired and cramped terribly unless I held them just so. Eventually, at about 11:30, I decided to put on my pack, to cover my back, and found a good patch of sand, where I lay down on my belly. The pack covered my back and made it warmer. The sand was quite good on my front side after it warmed up a bit from my body heat. I lay down and I couldn't believe it – I woke up at about 2:30 AM. I urinated and then woke up again at 5:30. Light! But of course, no heat. Whenever I was awake my teeth chattered constantly. Yet, I had slept for about 5 hours!

I got up at 5:30 because it was so good to see the light. I massaged my legs to get them to work and began to move some in the direction where I thought that I should go. By the time it was 6:30 AM, the sun finally rose over the hills and it warmed up. I had not much more food and little water. (Not good.)

I thought I had somehow walked upstream past our campsite and started going back downstream to try to locate a place I would recognize. Eventually, at about 9:30 AM or so, I heard someone calling my name. I whooped a call that Dorothy and I use when we are near, also calling her name, and after a while someone appeared through the underbrush not far from me. But not Dorothy! It was nice to meet Deputy Sheriff Brian Adams from the rescue team of Tulare County. I asked him if Dorothy was with him. No. She was at the van. He was across the stream in the correct canyon and showed me a good place to cross.

How did it happen he was there? Well, Dorothy will tell you about that herself.



David Parker's legs three days after hiking cross-country through wild terrain.

### **Dorothy's Story** by Dorothy Parker

We were in Long Valley, a favorite destination of ours. It is a perfect place to enjoy nature, which remains balanced and beautiful no matter what is happening in the chaotic world of humans.

I was alone in the campground, just as Dave was on the trail, but we were used to that. Dave is an experienced and careful hiker, who frequently takes off alone because I have arthritic knees and cannot go as far as he can.

When Dave had not returned by 4:30, however, I became concerned that he might be caught at dusk without his headlamp. As a precaution, I turned on the van's headlights as a beacon and started down the trail, carrying both of our headlamps, his jacket and extra water. At 5:30, I had to stop where the trail split into two because I was afraid that I might miss Dave if he came up one way and I went down the other. Also, the trail past that point was steep for my knees.

After waiting a bit, I returned to the van and then cycled that same route again, calling all of the time. On the second return to camp, it was so dark that I could hardly see the trail even with a headlamp. It was apparent that Dave would have to spend a chilly night in the wild, with only light clothing and little water.

I checked my cell phone. No reception.

I needed to go for help, but what if Dave returned while I was gone? All I could do was load a lounge chair with a flashlight, Dave's sleeping bag, his warm clothes, a gallon of water, and some food that would not attract animals.

By 11:30 PM I started driving in search of cell phone reception. Oddly, the need to focus on the difficult road was a help in keeping my mind off Dave's danger.

The trees on the uphill side of the road appeared in the headlights like grey-white ghosts with shifting shapes; I had to remember to aim toward them and not veer to the other side, which often was a steep precipice that I could not see.

Amid all of this, kangaroo rats hopped across the road and jackrabbits ran in front of

the van's headlights. They were my friends during this dark night. I cherished their company and was careful not to hit them.

It was three hours and 35 miles later when I finally reached an operator, who contacted the Tulare County Sheriff's Department, but only after a half-hour of confusion. "Return to the campground and a Deputy Sheriff will meet you there," I was told.

I reached the camp amid a beautiful sunrise, just before Deputy Bryan Adams appeared. He had gotten up soon after 3:00 AM, the time when 911 had contacted him, and had driven for two hours over difficult roads. What dedication and selflessness!

Bryan said that he knew the hiking trail well and would start walking as soon as the light got better. I heard no more until about 10:00 AM when another official truck appeared. The driver said that they had found a man 1.5 miles down the trail and he was coming to help.

Whew! That was how I learned that Dave had been found and was alive.

When Dave arrived at noon, he was walking independently. He was scratched, dirty and bloody in places, but otherwise healthy. Soon thereafter a paramedic appeared to check Dave's physical condition. She washed his cuts, applied band-aids, and told him to take a bath.

This story is a Valentine to the dedication, efficiency, and coordination of the Tulare County Sheriff's Rescue Team. We have written a formal thank-you letter and will be forever grateful.

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David E. Parker grew up in Springfield, Mass. He obtained an AB in Philosophy from Brown University, a MA in Psychology from Wesleyan University, and a PhD in Clinical Psychology from U.C. Berkeley. He now lives in La Jolla, CA. He has been fully retired since 1994. He is a member of SDIS.

Dave and Dorothy met at the International House of U.C. Berkeley in the last year of their PhD studies there. They worked in Wisconsin for 26 years before returning to California in 1997. Dorothy's biography accompanies the next section in this booklet.

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