Road Trip

by Peter Lopatin (January 2019)

Cityscape #3, Richard Diebenkorn, 1963

> *Here is realization,*
>
> *Here is a man tallied—he realizes here what he has in him,*
>
> *The past, the future, majesty, love—if they are vacant of you*

you are vacant of them.

—Walt Whitman

In mid-June, I set out from my home in Stamford, Connecticut on a long solo road trip out west. I had been thinking for years about taking such a trip—seeing the sights and doing some hiking in the Colorado Rockies and Utah—but had always found a reason to put it off. Finally, I resolved to do it.

As I thought over my travel plans, I imagined the splendor and majesty of the landscape and recalled Walt Whitman's *'Song of the Open Road':*

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,

Healthy, free, the world before me,

The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

I had some concern that in the rigors of one or another mountain hike, the physical infirmities of age might overcome my Whitmanesque exuberance and that the whole enterprise might even founder on the nasty shoals of arthritis. But I figured that since arthritis doesn't improve with age, it was now or never. So off I went.

But Whitman knew something more about the open road, something

beyond its tantalizing promise of exuberant freedom, something that I would have to experience first-hand in order to learn:

> *You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here,*
>
> *I believe that much unseen is also here.*

What was at first unseen were portals into the lives of people I encountered along the way, panoramas of the soul no less memorable than the natural panoramas of the west—all the more so for their being so unexpected, the singular offerings of pure happenstance. Some of the stories I would hear from these strangers would take my breath away and breathe something greater back into me. Here are three of those stories.

Parachute, Colorado

I’m sitting in my car in a parking lot in Parachute, Colorado, population 1,006. The town is situated at a point of transition between the craggy but verdant majesty of the Colorado Rockies and the more desiccated, Martian-like landscape of Utah, where I had just spent a week hiking in Canyonlands and Arches National Parks, after an equal stint in the Colorado Rockies.

I hear a tapping and look up to see a man of seventy or so, gesturing for me to lower the window.

“Excuse me,” he says. “Are you from Stamford?”

“Yes,” I reply. “How did you know?

“The sticker,” he says, pointing to the Stamford town parking sticker on my windshield.

“I used to be a teacher in Cos Cob,” he says with a smile. (Cos Cob is just down the road from Stamford.)

“Oh, really,” I say. “How about that!”

He tells me he’s going to Stamford to visit friends, but is driving first to Florida to spend some time with family. I wonder why he’s driving instead of flying. I wonder if we share an interest in seeing the great American landscape unfurl before us.

“I had a sister in Stamford,” he says.

I note his use of the past tense. “But she died ten years ago.” He looks off toward the mountain that looms over Parachute, then back at me.

I wonder: *Why is he telling this to me, a complete stranger, who made his acquaintance not ninety seconds ago?*

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say. (What does one say in these circumstances?)

“Are you from Stamford originally?” he asks.

“No, New York. But I’ve lived in Connecticut for many years,” I tell him.

“Oh, I really love New York,” he says, a smile all but engulfing his face. “I went to grad school at NYU.”

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Before I can ask him what he studied at NYU, he continues: “Yeah, I’d love to move back to New York, but I’d have a hard time going up and down the subway steps. The arthritis in my knees is real bad.”

“I know what you mean,” I say sympathetically. “My knees aren’t great either.” (Nor, for that matter, are my spine and hips.)

“Yeah,” he says, turning his gaze again toward the mountain,

“I’d love to go back to New York.” Then he turns back to me and says: “But the Lord called me to Utah.”

One needn’t be an atheist (I am not) to be flummoxed by such a remark. It suffices if one is an uncertain believer whose conception of the deity is ill-formed, abstract and entails no orthodoxy. I wondered—and wonder still—what it means, what it feels like, to feel a divine call to a vocation, a path in life. The atheist, of course, ‘knows’ this to be a delusion; the person of faith, by contrast, ‘knows’ it to be the highest truth. Both have absolute certainty about what they know. How remarkable it must be to have such certainty!

“Ah,” I say, nodding, unsure of how to formulate my question. “And how, exactly . . . I mean . . . specifically . . . ?”

“I’m a preacher,” he says, with a warm smile and, perhaps, a hint of pride. “I try to save people from polygamy.”

“Oh,” I say, nodding. It seems to me a worthy effort and I tell him so.

“Well, I guess Utah’s the place to do it,” I add, cheerfully.

We exchange some further pleasantries and say our goodbyes. Watching him amble back to his car, I become aware of a certain disquiet within me, which lingers after he has gone. Only later will I recognize it as the disquiet of unasked questions, unasked because to ask them would have been

presumptuous and intrusive: *You want to talk about your sister, don't you? What kind of woman was she? Why are you mentioning her death to me, a complete stranger?*

But another question goes unasked as well, because it is as yet inchoate, and it's not until I'm halfway across Nebraska that it takes articulable form: *When you hear the call, how do you know that it's the real thing, and not just another earthly ambition on top of so many other earthly ambitions?*

As I drive, I wonder whether I would pose that question to him if our paths were ever to cross again. And even now, after reflecting on it, I still don't know. There was a striking juxtaposition of intimacy and distance in our exchange and I'm not sure on which side of that divide the question properly falls. Would he take offense or regard it as a welcome invitation to expound on his faith, and if the latter, would I have it within me to understand him?

Paducah, Kentucky

Driving along I-24, about midway between Nashville and St. Louis, I notice a small billboard informing drivers that the next exit—Paducah, Kentucky—is the home of The National Quilt Museum. 'The National *what*?' I think. A museum devoted solely to quilts? Imagine that!

The exit approaches, and as it does, an internal colloquy plays out: *If you don't go to The National Quilt Museum right now, you never will. But so what? Do you have any interest in*

quilts? But hey, it might be interesting! I tell myself that it's lunchtime anyway, so I may as well stop and have a look. And so, at the last moment, I pull onto the exit, not really knowing why. After a sandwich at a local diner, I head over to the Museum.

As it turns out, the museum is an attractively designed space and contains an impressive display of quilts—many quite beautiful—in a multitude of styles, designed and executed by quilt-makers from around the world. But that's not the story. Here's the story:

At the lobby ticket counter, only one person is ahead of me in line, a tall, heavy-set man in his 70s, with a sad expression, his face flushed and his eyes reddened and moist. Behind the counter sits a slight, white-haired woman who looks to be in her early 80s. The two are talking. I wait my turn and listen. In an urgent and distraught tone, the man is telling the woman about a quilt that his late wife made. He explains that she had won many prizes in local contests for her canned fruits and vegetables and had made a quilt commemorating her achievements. He is concerned about what will happen to the quilt after his death and says that he can't bear the thought that it might be sold to a stranger. He asks the woman if he can donate it to the museum. (I wonder if he has no children or other family who would take the quilt, or if he doesn't trust them not to sell it, but I never find out.) Aware, I think, that I'm waiting to buy a ticket, he takes a few steps back from the counter, but continues speaking to the woman, who has noticed me but clearly doesn't want to cut the man off. I don't want to cut him off either, so I wait and listen.

The woman patiently explains to him that the museum does not

accept donations of that sort. She suggests that he talk to his family members about the quilt.

"It's just that . . . I mean, how much longer do I have?" he asks. He is choking back tears. I feel sorry for him and wish there were something I could suggest. At the same time, I am impatient to get my ticket. But to interrupt now would be to trespass on what, for him, is sacred ground, and so I wait for an opening. *Soon, but not yet . . . Not yet.*

Closing her eyes for a moment, the woman puts her right hand over her heart, takes a deep breath, and says (as much to me, I think, as to the man): "I *must* tell you a story."

Implicitly—or at least it seems that way to me—she is also saying: *'And you must listen.'* And so I listen. She begins:

"When my mother was 94, she told me about a conversation she'd had years before with her sister about her sister's little daughter, Maddie. You see, Maddie had this very special plate that only *she* ate from. No one else was allowed to eat from it. Well, they had their family dog. It was a big dog, and one day, when Maddie was little, she was standing by the fireplace and that dog crashed right into her and knocked her into the fireplace and she was burned to death."

The man and I are taken aback. I gasp. The woman continues:

"My mother said that many years after the accident she asked

her sister: ‘Whatever happened to Maddie’s plate?’ And her sister told her that as she got older she’d started to think about what might happen to the plate after she was gone and that she couldn’t bear the thought that someone else might eat off it, and so she went into the box where she had stored all of Maddie’s things, found the plate, and smashed it to pieces and threw them out.”

And that’s all she says. I don’t know what to say. The man is wiping away his tears. The woman has—unintentionally, I think—upped the ante, as it were, from the sentimental to the tragic. Implicitly, she is telling him that he has two choices: destroy the quilt or work things out with his family. I can’t help but imagine him, scissors in hand, cutting up the quilt he loves so much into so many strips of cloth. He says a few things that I don’t remember, thanks her for listening, and leaves.

I turn to the woman. I feel as though I ought to say something, but *‘My, that was quite a story’* isn’t going to cut it. Instead, I say something polite but so unmemorable that I no longer remember what it was. Then, I say: “May I have one ticket, please?” She smiles and gives me my ticket and I go in to the museum.

When I come out later, I pass by the woman, who is still seated at the ticket desk. Only she and I are in the entrance area. My footsteps echo in the high-ceilinged space. She smiles at me. I return her smile and walk out the door. In a few minutes, I’m back on the highway, troubled by a discordant mix swirling within me: sympathy and sadness, poignancy and tragedy, together with the unanticipated pleasure I have just experienced in the artistry of the exhibit. I am amazed at the

unlikely congruence of the two stories and of the stark fact of my presence as a witness to both. How unlikely – and yet how *right*—it all seems, this convergence of lives, including my own. How can it possibly be? And yet, how could it *not* have been?

Cottonwood Falls, Kansas

After visiting a friend in Kansas City, I head out to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in the Flint Hills region of Kansas. The Preserve is a piece of the American prairie left untilled, much as it was before it was settled, its rocky soil rendering it ill-suited to wheat farming. My plan is to spend two days hiking and taking pictures.

It will turn out to be time well spent. In place of wheat, wild grasses and wildflowers still grow undisturbed over the low rolling hills. Buffalo roam free over its 11,000 acres of pasture, with hardly a sign of civilization in sight. The only sounds I hear are the wind and the occasional chirping of birds. Earth, air, light and silence. Who could ask for more?

I stay at the Grand Central Hotel, on 'Broadway Street' in nearby Cottonwood Falls, population 903. In the evening, I step out on to the street and point my camera toward the Chase County Courthouse, the principal building in town, two blocks away. Even though I've positioned myself in the middle of the street, I have no worries about passing cars because there are none. I take all the time I need to compose my shot. It's a clear, mild Saturday night in late June, but the streets of Cottonwood Falls are all but empty. I see only one parked car.

Occasionally, I see someone walk by. It’s as if most of the town is away on vacation.

The hotel is a rustic, cozy place with a western décor, including a different branding iron on each room door. The guests are friendly, and at dinner—which turns out to be better than I expected—I find myself chatting with the two women seated at the table next to me. Loretta is a tall, lanky woman in her early seventies, whose hands look like they’ve seen more than their share of work. Her gaze is direct and commands attention. Her features, though not refined, have a raw, honest beauty about them.

We tell ourselves that it’s wrong to judge people by their appearance, and this is true. But we do so nevertheless—if only provisionally—and I quickly and confidently judge Loretta and her friend, Beth, to be of admirable character.

Loretta likes to talk and I enjoy listening to her. Beth, who is of about the same age, is cordial as well, with a warm smile and the glint of a spirited intelligence in her eyes, but without Loretta’s volubility. Her voice is quiet, and it strikes me as the quietness of infirmity, an impression enhanced by the foam neck collar she is wearing—the kind you might wear for a pinched nerve—which gives her posture an unnatural stiffness. She seems frail, as if she is working hard to hold herself together. Loretta takes the lead in the conversation, but Beth follows it all attentively.

From our chat, I learn that during the 1970s, Loretta spent two years as a nurse in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan. She

strikes me as stolid and robust and I can well imagine her enduring the rigors she must have faced in that country. I'm impressed by her background and eager to hear about Afghanistan, but Loretta is more interested in hearing about my trip and, in particular, about my experience at the Preserve. As it happens, I'd had an unnerving encounter with a herd of buffalo that first day. Both ladies are eager to hear the details, so I tell them:

I was out on one of the Preserve's hiking trails and came upon the herd, which was grazing off to the left of the trail at my ten o'clock, about a hundred yards away. I took out my camera and started taking pictures. About fifty yards ahead and just a few feet to the right of the trail, there was a lone buffalo, standing apart from the herd. He was too close to the trail for me to feel comfortable walking past him, so I just stopped and let my telephoto lens serve as a substitute for courage.

After a few minutes, the herd suddenly seemed to notice me and started walking slowly toward me, at an oblique angle, but in my general direction. In the lead was the largest of them (the dominant male, I assume) who appeared to be looking right at me. After a minute or so, I thought it best to retreat, so I started backing up slowly. (The visitor brochure advises that you walk, not run, from approaching buffalo). But the herd kept following, now taking a more direct angle toward me, the big male still sauntering confidently in the lead. As I picked up my pace, they did so too—and more—and they steadily closed the distance between us. I was about two hundred yards from the safety of the perimeter fence. I stopped snapping photos, turned and just kept walking, still picking up my pace and glancing over my shoulder every few steps.

As they got closer, there came a point when my fascination turned to concern and concern to fear. I thought that perhaps, at some point soon—brochure or no brochure—my best bet might be to make a run for it. I started to imagine the worst: the herd breaking into a stampede and overtaking me before I make it to the fence. I see myself getting trampled. I imagine the mass of the approaching beasts as they overtake me, the sound of their hooves, their enormous weight crushing the life and breath out of me.

Of course, there was an absurd, comical quality to the whole affair. Yes, they were in fact closing the distance between us; yes, they were turning more directly into my path; yes, the big male was heading directly for me; yes, they were now actually *on* the hiking path, making a beeline toward me. But who the hell gets trampled to death by buffalo in a fenced preserve in Kansas these days? It's simply too ridiculous. I felt embarrassed for my cowardice and reassured myself that no one would ever know about this incident. (Unless I were to tell them, which of course I never would.)

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When I was about fifty yards from the perimeter fence, the herd's interest in me vanished as suddenly as it had been aroused a few minutes earlier. It was as if they had shown me to the door. (I am reminded of the stock line from the old

Westerns when some tough hombre says pointedly to the unwelcome stranger: *‘Now Mister, maybe you’d best be moving on out of town.’*) They stopped walking in my direction and resumed grazing. I walked on out, past the fence, back toward the parking area.

When I arrived at the visitors’ center, I saw a notice on the door, which had escaped my attention earlier. It said that, lately, the buffalo had been unusually aggressive, probably because it was calving season, and cautioned visitors to keep their distance*. ‘Well,’* I think, *‘that’s good to know.’*

Loretta and Beth enjoy the story. Loretta is looking forward to hiking out on the trail to see the buffalo. She mentions that Beth will wait for her at the visitors’ center while she hikes alone.

“Oh, you don’t like to hike?” I ask Beth.

“Well, I’m not really up to it,” Beth says.

“Beth isn’t in such good health,” Loretta adds.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say to Beth.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Beth says with an easy smile and a dismissive wave of the hand.

“Beth never complains,” Loretta says, smiling lovingly at her friend. “I’ve never known anyone as uncomplaining as Beth.”

Beth blushes and dismisses the compliment. I wonder what ails her but I let the remark pass. We chat for a few minutes longer before I say good night.

The next morning, when I come down for breakfast, I see Loretta and take a seat at the table next to her. She is alone. We chat.

“Where’s Beth this morning?” I ask.

“She needs some extra time to get herself together,” Loretta explains. “Beth is quite ill.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

Not waiting for my next question, Loretta adds: “She has Myasthenia Gravis.”

All I know about the disease is that it’s autoimmune, incurable and causes muscle weakness, which can be extreme. Do people die of it? I don’t know.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” I say.

“She has so much to deal with,” Loretta says, “but she never complains about anything. Not ever.”

I don’t know what to say. Loretta continues:

“Did you notice the neck collar she was wearing? At night, she has to wear a special stiff collar to keep her head from falling over and obstructing her windpipe.”

“Oh,” I say, sadly.

The frailty I perceived in Beth now has a substantive and somber context.

“That’s probably how she’s going to die,” Loretta says matter-of-factly. “From asphyxiation. Eventually, she’s just going to choke to death,” Loretta says.

I’m taken aback by the casual bluntness of her remark. I don’t have the medical knowledge to assess the accuracy of her prognosis. But she’s a nurse. She must know what she’s talking about. I feel sorry for Beth and I admire Loretta’s devotion to her. I’m sure that my facial expression reveals more than the few words I speak. A shadow has been cast over the conversation. Before either of us can say much more, Beth

appears and her smile disperses the darkness.

“Good morning, Beth!” I say, making sure to show good cheer. But I can’t avoid imagining her gasping for breath. “How are you today?”

“Oh, I’m fine, Peter. Just fine, thank you!” she answers, still smiling. I think: *No, Beth, no! You’re not fine. You’re dying! You’re dying!* But nothing in her smile seems forced and I wonder where its wellsprings lie.

“Beth never complains,” Loretta says with admiration. Beth blushes and waves off the compliment as she had the night before. After some further pleasantries, I leave them to their own conversation.

That’s the last I see of Loretta and Beth before my departure from Cottonwood Falls.

After breakfast, I return to the Preserve to find that the buffalo had moved on from the area they were grazing the day before, and I’m able to hike much further into the heart of the Preserve. After walking for about three miles—far from the perimeter fence—I see the herd in the distance, a good quarter mile away. The trail has become obscure and difficult to follow, seeming to blend into the prairie itself. But if I’m reading it right, it heads directly toward the herd. I decide to go back the way I came.

I walk up a small rise, which offers an overview of the herd and the surrounding area. The herd is now distant enough so that I'm not concerned about my safety, but still—I don't yet know why—I think about my few moments of fear from the day before, and I imagine again the hooves of a fifteen hundred-pound beast on my chest, crushing the breath out of my lungs.

On the walk back, I think of Beth and try to picture the collar she wears at night. I force myself to imagine more than that, then force myself not to. But the day is bright, the panorama expansive and magnificent, the breeze gentle. There isn't anyone in sight. I imagine Beth out on the trail, free of her neck collar, walking and breathing with strength and ease, with a brightness and beauty in her eyes that rivals the day itself. I stop, close my eyes and breathe deeply, concentrating on the sensation of the air as it fills my lungs. And again. And again. I feel grateful. It feels good simply to breathe. It feels so good.

Afterword

Some roads just lead to other roads. But if you open your eyes and ears, you may find more than you had ever expected. And here's the real nugget: people will teach you things about your capacity for feeling and for understanding, but also for sympathy, in the very best sense. Whitman writes:

> *I am larger, better than I thought,*
>
> *I did not know I held so much goodness.*

I did not know.

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