

Path of Petroglyphs
Symbols for the ages
by Dale Walker

Being the fifth installment of
Travels as Peaceful Valley Walker
The bicycle travels of a peaceful warrior

Peaceful Valley Press 2025

Path of Petroglyphs

Route of the ancients

Travels as Peaceful Valley Walker Book 5

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This work depicts actual events in the life of the author as truthfully as recollection permits and/or can be verified by research. Occasionally, dialogue consistent with the character or nature of the person speaking has been supplemented. All persons within are actual individuals. The names of some individuals may have been changed to respect their privacy.

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Hugs

After two years of almost nonstop travel through eight countries and more than half of the US states, I loved having a room to myself and even bought a reading chair to put in it. The luxury of a full kitchen was another blessing.

My bike needed blessings too and I fixed it at a nearby bicycle cooperative, installing an all new drivetrain. I could hardly ignore the symbolism and noted that the love of being at home had reaffirmed my own drive. With all of the purpose and intention which I'd cultivated over the previous two years, I still felt called. Apparently, my work wasn't done yet.

The calling wasn't like a commandment to do anything in particular, and as I'd so clearly come to understand, I was not to subject myself to any illusions. There was no sense of grandeur or even of fate. It was more of an acknowledgment that I had successfully centered myself and that from this place of clarity, I could still be of use. When I did try to explain the urge, my language was simply that it was the call of the road. Entirely unable to resist, I found a destination in mind and prepared to

depart.

St. Paul was as kind in my departure as it had been during the stay and my host Candace sent me off with hugs and blessings. I had plenty of everything else and love was the only fuel I needed. Claire topped off my tank in Minneapolis with another hug and I was well-squeezed for the road. Little did I know how many more hugs were to come.

The Luce Line Trail, a 63 mile long multi-use path that I'd taken into the city the year before, led me back towards the open road.

Near Wayzata, a man who was just riding a few miles on his mountain bike caught up with me. Pete had seen my loaded bike and the sheer volume of my gear astounded him. He didn't know what to make of it and in particular, he wanted to know about a totem which was mounted on my front rack. It was a toy soldier, a small forward scout that I'd found beside the road in Canada two months earlier. It was my forward scout and the day after I found it, I met a real forward scout from the Canadian army. To my mind at the time, the toy had come to life and I told Pete about how the man and I had become friends.

Pete wanted to become friends too and also to hear more stories so we rode together down the trail towards a nearby park that he knew of, talking as we rode. I told him about experiences where my thoughts came quite clearly from different centers of consciousness. One example was when I thought I wanted a ride in Mexico but really didn't. The awareness which saved me from defeating my own purpose at that time arose from intentional thinking and was distinct from normal uncontrolled thoughts.

We continued our conversation at the park, going on from our discussion about purpose to talk about meditation and how

we might identify a meditative state. Someone had once told him that since he bicycles, he experiences meditation, that it comes with the territory. Like me though, he had never once said to himself, "Wow, I'm meditating now." But also like me, he'd found a certain peace.

Anyway, whether or not it was what is classically called meditation, it had real results. There was the awareness of different centers of consciousness for example and we became brothers talking about this. I knew the brotherhood was true because when he was ready to leave, he didn't stick his hand out for a shake, he opened his arms for a hug.

We hugged and he rode off but he came right back with a flat tire. We talked more as he fixed it, just about mundane stuff, and it was meditative to chat with him as he worked. I left after he put the wheel back on but before he was all packed up.

Two miles later, I saw him again in my rear view mirror. "Dale," he called. He'd caught up to say goodbye again. Our brotherhood was that sincere. We talked a bit more then he turned around and rode back the other way. This was a grand blessing, innocent. We simply accepted our friendship and honored it.

Much later, almost at dark, I came upon a man and woman walking with five poodles. They were carrying a bag of wild grapes that they'd just picked. Tom and Tammy were neighbors and close friends. Her two dogs were white while his were a very light tan. The dogs were all small but different sizes, from five pounds to twenty-five pounds.

After they stopped barking at me, Tom picked each of the dogs up, one after another, and introduced them, holding each one there as long as I kept petting it. I was in dog heaven and both

people were as nice as the dogs. We were of one heart. With love there is love. This was like a hug also.

Being away from the city and free on the trail, all I wanted to do was keep going and even rode an hour into the night. Eventually I found a spot under the stars on a horse trail adjacent to the bike path. By then I was far enough from the city that there was no traffic sound at all and no distant sirens either. I got the best night's sleep in months, not waking until eight the next morning.

Hutchinson marked the end of the North Woods and the start of the prairie. I rode against the wind south and didn't meet or speak with anyone all day. It was hot and I rested a lot. I was shaking off the demons of the city and had my head down. I wrote:

Bicycling on
Head down into the unknown
Another day passes

After camping next to the railroad tracks in the cemetery at Winsted, I rode on to New Ulm, picking up some fruit and stuff from the grocery store there and simply taking my time. It was very hot out already and there was more wind to face. The ride to Comfrey would be much like the day before: just me, my bike, and the wind. This solitude nurtured me. As hard as bicycling was, particularly with a heavy load, I found great comfort in it and was at home in the saddle. Although I didn't meet anyone, I stopped at every town and took advantage of all the shade that I could find. The riding was a delight and straight as an arrow across a perfectly flat plain, a landscape that was gorgeously verdant, bursting with new growth from the previous week's rain.

The people in Comfrey all waved and smiled. It was a town that welcomed travelers and they even had a camping area in their city park. There was a hot shower, picnic tables, and a sign instructing campers to register at the convenience store. I didn't immediately register for a site, but I didn't set up either. I made a couple sandwiches and rested. Perhaps I would ride on.

As I ate my supper, the town cop drove by. Although he didn't stop, I could tell by the way he looked at me that I'd see him again later. Just before dark, after taking a shower and as I was walking back to my bike, the officer returned. He was still in uniform but off duty and had his son with him. If the police approach with their eleven year old son, it should be obvious that it won't be problematic and it wasn't.

The man and his son were both vertically challenged. The boy was only the height of an eight year old and his dad was shorter than me. I teased them about their height and we all laughed together. When I explained my purpose by talking about the dream of my childhood, the father asked his son what he wanted to be when he grew up. I bit my tongue. People don't grow up to be, they grow up to do. The boy wanted to be a navy seal.

The welcome to Comfrey put me at ease and in the morning I rode on towards Jeffers Petroglyphs. I was truly back in my groove, centered and consciously meditating to allow for my place in the world. The petroglyph site where I was going had been held sacred for at least nine thousand years and to the best of my ability, I would approach in a reverential manner.

Although I'd been to the site before, then it had just been a curiosity. I looked at the petroglyphs and read the history at the visitor center. This time I was traveling under my own power and in prayer. The world was beautiful and I honored this creation. I

was also approaching from the backside which was a gravel road. Unlike the paved routes, this path followed a stream course and within a mile of the site, Cottonwood Creek had a nice sandy swimming hole. I cleansed and was fasting too. I didn't think of this as something I was doing in preparation for the visit though. I was simply praying, hadn't eaten yet, and knew better than to skip a swimming hole. Nevertheless, the visit was important to me, a pilgrimage. I was truly reverential but not approaching on my knees. The clearest feeling was of respect for the accumulated reverence.

After my swim I climbed out of the valley still on the gravel road which by then bordered the monument. The visitor center, (the entrance for the tourists), was just past the site and to the left on a paved county road. That's the way I had come in before but halfway from the rise out of the Cottonwood Creek valley was a recessed gate. I parked my bike against it, climbed over, and followed the rocks through a blooming prairie across to the rock carvings.

The petroglyphs were pecked into the quartzite and stood out clearly in the early morning sun. Informational placards explained that shamans would go there and enter the stone. Hand petroglyphs marked where they came back out.

There were more than four thousand different petroglyphs and the stones spoke to me. I was drawn to the man who lost his arm glyph. Another symbol was a hand with a lightning bolt passing through it. Twenty-five years earlier, I was struck by lightning. It went into the side of my hand below my index finger, crossed my palm, and exited just above my wrist. This was the same as what I saw in the rock.

It astounded me that I was seeing the place so differently

from how I had during my previous visit. The biggest difference was that I was allowing for the sacred and had spent many hours exploring how reverence might engender that quality, embed it in place so to speak. It had been the topic of the hour three months earlier in Ontario. I wasn't here at the petroglyphs with any preconception of meaning though. Neither was I there to look into the past. My intent was simply to be present and allow for truth at this particular place. It was a mindset that filled me with peace.

On my way back to the bike there was a rock that stood alone, surrounded by low prairie grasses and wildflowers. I stopped there to breathe, and as I sat down, knew I should offer tobacco as so many others had. Decades earlier, my friend had taught me how to do this. There was no great ceremony, simply a sharing of the smoke. My intent was strong though, I had prayed, was praying. I fasted, no food had crossed my tongue since I rose. I cleansed, and immersion in water was also an immersion in place. It was another way to be on the earth, in this place. So I offered the tobacco, put my hand on the rock, and met the stone.

The vision only lasted a few seconds, maybe a quarter of a minute. In it, I saw in full circle and somewhat beyond the horizon. I was placed, as in a very profound sense of place, rooted. I'm not sure that I have the words to describe what I felt. It was less a vision and more a feeling except for the full circle sight. When I rode on, I saw the land differently. I felt like someone was with me and although the fields were full of corn, my sight was a view across tall grass prairie from the height of horseback. No sooner had I seen it like that than the view changed and I was looking out from the height of people walking. This vision also lasted for less than a minute. As soon as I stopped again I wrote:

Full circle vision
Sight awakes in surrender
Presenting all ages

Halfway to the next town I stopped at a church which was right beside the road and met Mervin, the pastor. The parsonage was next to the church and I saw a nice garden in the backyard. I'd stopped out front to rest and saw him at work through an uncurtained window. He didn't notice me right away but when he did, he came out in greeting. His blue eyes shone.

He didn't ask where I was going although he meant to. He asked, "What's your ultimate destination?" All I could think to say was that there was no greater destination than acceptance of the light of God. This was said with a knowing look, eye to eye and heart to heart.

I'd seen him at work through the window of the church and asked what he was writing. He replied that he was working on a Bible study about the Word of God and clarified to say that he meant the words of the Holy Bible. I bit my tongue because that's not the living word that I talk about and I might have commented.

Instead, we talked about the deceiver and I had two stories about hearing a voice that tried to convince me that my vision was too hard. In both of those instances, the voice was in my head. I clearly knew, even at those times, that my purpose didn't reside there; it was in my heart, a center of truth which easily disempowered the lying voices. The sole purpose of the mind is to implement the intent of the heart and a brain serving a purposeless heart will act like a child seeking negative attention. This was all said to argue that his *Christ in the Heart* philosophy was immediate and of practical value, not just words in a book. I said, "If it's real it should be practical."

Along the path I walked, miracles were a matter of course. The bike I was riding even right then was a gift from a stranger received one hour after praying, "Not my will but thine." Too many pastors like Mervin failed to understand that the Holy Bible is only a guidebook and not the realm that it attempts to describe. I was continually frustrated that anyone idolized the book instead of living truth, realizing that this technique short circuited the desired result. I wanted to shake him up because of this, and I did, but I remained tactful. I stated the truth with examples. He woke up for a minute and maybe it would last.

We were brothers too. We talked about the children we'd each raised. He asked great questions about how I traveled, what I carried, and where I slept. We were friends in that. I described a difference between us above but we also had this unity. We shared brotherhood and even laughed together.

He prayed for me, that God would be with me on the road that day. And then after all this he asked if I carry a Bible. I didn't say it but I didn't need a crutch. I stopped later and wrote:

According to the gospels, Jesus prayed to his father before he was crucified that, "they may be one even as You and I are one." This was the son of God asking his father a favor, his last prayer, making it one with a high likelihood of fulfillment. Perhaps it has even come to pass but we don't know what to do with the blessing. We occasionally encounter the effect of that unity granted though, the prayer fulfilled, and call it *a moment of grace*. In my experience, if such should happen to you, note it. What does it look like, feel like, and sound like? Practice this and perhaps we can learn how to live in grace, in oneness.

If God was real, how could there be any separation? And given this prayer by that specific deity, I was certain that any validity did not depend on a *Holy* text. This idea would come back to me several times over the next few months.

Past Jeffers, I rested at every town and each roadside cemetery. There were great views over the prairie, particularly above the Des Moines river east of Curry. Curry had a large shady park where I met a Hispanic family from San Cristobal de las Casas. They didn't speak any English but I could still speak a bit of Spanish. They understood what I was doing in only a few words too. I'd been to their mountain, placed myself there even, and with that familiarity, we were family.

There was a State Trail near Woodstock which I'd hoped to ride into Pipestone but it was unsurfaced and overgrown. The trailhead was great for camping though and after a good night's sleep, I rode back to the highway and quickly made my way to town.

A warrior was waiting for me there, a little boy named Warrior. I knew who his mother was right away. I'd never met her but her thick dreadlocks and the way she approached me eager for the company of a traveler made it clear that she was the sister who had posted from Pipestone on the Minnesota rainbow family page a month earlier. I'd commented on her post and we had that acquaintance. We hugged and I sang the little boy a portion of the Nahko song that goes, "Be a warrior. Be a man among men."

My destination was Pipestone National Monument. Legend has it that eons ago, the creator gathered all the peoples of the earth there and showed them the stone, telling the gathered multitudes, "This stone is the same as your blood. Make your pipes from this and smoke together in peace." I had made pipes

from the stone in the past and little did I know that the stone I would soon collect would be in my hand right now, seven years later, smoke rising in prayer.

When I was almost to the monument, I heard someone calling my name. He actually thought I was someone else and had hollered, "Bill," which I readily misunderstood. He was an old hillbilly from Kentucky raised in Brown County, Indiana and I'd been there myself but not in decades. Nevertheless, I remembered the county, knew the place, and this was part of what made us family.

We smoked together, him and I and his wife, then he gave me a beer and a sandwich. After I told him what I was up to, he walked with me to a neighbor's lot that was littered with pipestone. A Native American artist carved at this place. Seeing me, he came out, and understanding my intent, allowed me to take a couple small pieces of the stone.

There were two children back at my new friend's house, a boy who was about twelve with a riding mower converted into a hotrod and his sister who was only five or six and who came with the kind of smile that could brighten a room. Both of them wanted to show me everything. The entire family welcomed me like that. I rode on with four more hugs.

Although I'd missed it on every other visit, the Three Maidens guard the entrance to the quarry. The Maidens are large quartz boulders, glacial erratics dropped where no other quartz exists. According to tradition, the rocks are eggs of the war eagle, guardian spirits of the quarries. Originally, these spirits were surrounded by 35 slabs of quartzite with 79 petroglyphs inscribed upon them. Generations made offerings there, asking for the grace to quarry.

The first time that I ever went to the Pipestone National Monument was with my family when I was a small boy. There's a visitor center and a trail which leads past precontact quarries used for thousands of years. This path follows a low quartzite cliff which stands across the prairie like a frozen wave. Winnewissa Falls flows briskly down its face. For me it was a place of pilgrimage and I'd been there many times over the course of my life.

There was a stone carver at work in the visitor center and we talked about the real world versus the mundane. We agreed that reality was present in the breaths we took and in the existent love in our lives. As we talked, he began to shine a lovelight and although he hadn't mentioned that he was a parent, I saw in his light what I took as love for a child. When he finally told me about the toddler, that portion of his love that I'd identified as such grew brighter and brighter. This validated my sight.

Later, after I crossed into South Dakota and after setting up camp at Split Rock Park in Garretson, I wrote about all that had happened since Jeffers. As I did, I realized how I had to let go of what I thought I knew in order to allow for what was actually knowable. I might have thought that I knew rocks didn't speak but they spoke to me. I might have thought that the Bible was the final word but the pastor and I drank the Living Water, a far greater authority. And I might have thought that love was only an emotion, not something that vividly shares the character of a heart. If I'd only relied on knowledge, I would not have heard the planet, enlivened Melvin, or known what I was seeing within the stone carver's love. I wrote:

Respecting all paths,
Knowledgeable unknowing
The sole certainty

With rain expected the next morning, I put up my canopy tarp. It was a spacious dry shelter. The rain started at five and kept falling for four hours. I passed the time with coffee, ginger snaps, and words. By nine there was a break in the storm and I packed up for a ride to nearby Devil's Gulch. This was another place of pilgrimage for me and I remembered the last time I was there with my children. It had those personal feelings for me but I also felt that it was another precontact sacred place and kept my eyes open for visions of that past.

Also known as Spirit Canyon, Devil's Gulch is a narrow gorge where Split Rock Creek cuts through the local quartzite that underlies the prairie. A thin mist and a hint of fog made the spirit side of things close. Precontact legends say that Iktomi, the trickster, accepted a tomahawk duel there. He threw his hatchet high into the sky and when it returned to earth, it split the rock and carved a bottomless hole in the creek. A local told me that an attempt was made to measure the depth but they ran out of rope at six hundred feet. To this day, nobody knows how deep it is. This was immediately below the twenty foot gap that Jesse James jumped to escape from a posse after robbing a bank in Northfield, Minnesota.

By ten it was raining again and I rode on through it, aiming for a clearing in the clouds which appeared to the southwest. I remember riding along wet, looking at that brighter spot of sky as if it could be my salvation. I couldn't quite catch up to it but had my choice of places to stay in Sioux Falls so kept

going through the storm.

The first place with an awning where I could get out of the weather was in Brandon at a convenience store next to the interstate. Almost as soon as I stopped, a man approached me. We'd never met but when we did, it was as if we already knew each other. He was from New York and lived on Lake Erie south of Buffalo. Of course, I'd been there before and knowing anything about someone's home is welcoming. This is part of why we took to each other. He also had an adventurous spirit and was on his way west to hike the Wind River range but had time to explore before getting there. Recognizing me for the traveler I was, he asked for suggestions and I had them: Sheep Table Mountain, Harney Peak, and Devil's Tower.

The man and I talked about living a real life and finding meaning at the end of a day. We compared the serenity of him hiking in the wilderness to the serenity I found bicycling and were brothers in this. Before he left, he went to his truck and returned right away with a handful of change. "For coffee," he said, but it was an offering. There was another man out there who seeing this, insisted on giving me five dollars.

The storm was almost over by then and I rode on farther into Brandon. It was still raining so I didn't go very far, just to a grocery store less than a mile down the road. I watched the rain and knew it would end soon so I just waited. After a while, a man came out of the store pushing a shopping cart with a few groceries and his walker in it. He was using the cart to support himself. I asked if he'd like help and he said no, but he took out his billfold and gave me a dollar. I protested that I hadn't asked but admitted that it would be helpful and accepted the bill.

Then he decided that he would indeed like me to help so I

walked with him to his truck. When I thanked him again for his kindness he dramatically said, "No, thank you." It was a Chief Dan George quote from an old Clint Eastwood movie. When he told me, I realized that he looked like Eastwood and said as much. He replied, "I know."

The rain stopped and I rode on to Falls Park on the Little Sioux River. As I've mentioned, I'd been to many of these places before. I was born north of there in Watertown, visited the falls with my family as a child, then drove to and hitchhiked there throughout the decades. I even took my own children there.

The falls, swollen from the night's rain, raced over a quartzite cliff, roaring through gaps between the rocks. The Little Sioux River wasn't flooded, but it was full, as was I, full of the beauty.

Modern bike trails followed both banks of the river passing through remains of old mills built from the native stone. I followed the west bank to downtown Sioux Falls where I found a revitalized city core looking more alive than I'd ever seen it. There was a sculpture garden and even public marimbas. People were on the street and there were few empty storefronts. I was aiming for a food co-op on 12th Street. Not that I needed anything, it just happened to be another place where I'd been many times. I thought about how places like this were petroglyphs themselves, each visit another peck into the stone of my life.

My friend lived less than a mile from there. This was a man that I met in 1979 when I was only fifteen. He not only introduced me to the traveling life, but also to a vital spiritual life. He was Native American, a Lakota, and in addition to learning from the stories he told me, I watched how he looked at the world.

In practice, beauty was never out there somewhere, separate from us, but always in relationship. I began to learn this from him and the knowledge still informed me, thirty-nine years later.

Given his influence, I was excited to tell him about what I'd experienced at the petroglyphs but as I told him about it, my description was through the lens of my own preconceptions. I assumed that I met the ancestors. My friend set me straight though saying, "No, you met the rock."

My second cousin Bailee came to get me for supper. We'd never met in person but had been internet friends for several years. Something about her when we first met online had made me believe in her. She went through some tough times after that but I always knew that she would pull through and she did. Finally meeting her in person I knew clearly that she was worth everything. She was creative, intelligent, and practical minded.

Bailee was also a new mother and I loved holding her baby Adalyn. I fell asleep with the child in my arms and she laughed at me when I woke up.

Her and her partner cooked supper and when the food was done they called the neighbors to join us. In that neighborhood, sharing was a matter of survival. After I ate, I sat out front to smoke a cigarette and as I sat there puffing away, a very doped up man walked by hawking his wares, "I've got meth. Anyone want meth?" I didn't look at him but he looked over his shoulder four times to see if I was.

Back at my old friend's place, I simply felt at home. I'd spent so many nights in his other houses over the years, and had even been right there three years earlier. There were few people whom I'd known for so long. This was family. After a good night's sleep, I departed again - rested, clean, well fed, and with a gift of

dried buffalo meat which would last me all the way to Arizona.

My next stop was at a bicycle shop for patch glue but they didn't sell any. Their customers were the kind of riders who never fixed a flat. They did have patch kits, gimmicks which advertised their shop. These had little tiny tubes of glue in them though and I accepted one. I didn't know it then but I wouldn't get a flat until New Mexico and it was a good thing I didn't; the glue didn't work.

From there I stopped at several stores looking for rolling tobacco. I mostly had everything else although I intended to stock up with anything that caught my eye. There were three people from Florida in the parking lot of the first place, salt of the earth type people: a father, his adult son, and a very tattooed woman the son's age. Her tattoos were all stick and poke too, not professional work.

They were from a rural part of Florida and of course I'd been there. It was somewhere around Mariana and I remembered their town well enough to talk about what life was like there. There was some brotherhood in this and the man gave me a gift of four cigarettes.

There was no tobacco at the second store either but when I came back out, there was a crisp twenty dollar bill stuffed into my cup holder. As I folded the bill and put it in my billfold I heard a horn honk. Across the parking lot a man in a Mustang gave me a thumbs up. I brought my hands together and up trying to say, "Prayerful gratitude," from across the lot.

Eventually I found everything that I needed and with that, I was ready for the plains.

Past the edge of the city the land was flatter and more arid than what I'd already been through. It wasn't dry but was less verdant than the plains on the other side of the Little Sioux River.

The trees were smaller too and the wildlands between fields were more often in prairie grasses rather than groves. Every farmyard had a slough. Some of my earliest memories were of collecting asparagus from land just like this.

The first town after that was Parker and Dave and Dan greeted me as I rolled in. They'd both lived there their entire lives and neither had traveled so they were very curious about what I was doing. They wanted to wrap their minds around it.

Dave was retired and had retired with a beautiful smile. I said with great respect, "You lived here your whole life, never left, and you're still smiling," and in that he knew that I understood how hard life was there.

The other man, Dan, was leaning against the store like he owned it so I asked, "Is this your business?" He looked amused at the idea, as if there was some absurdity in the conception of himself as a store keeper. With a slight embarrassment, he replied that he mowed a few lawns and occasionally helped out with farm work. Later when we shook hands, I realized that he suffered a grievous physical disability.

When they asked what I did, a confident authority that I never imagined would ever be me arose. I said, "I'm Peaceful Valley Walker," and I didn't have to use many words to say what I did because we felt it there together. We'd opened a window in our hearts letting in the light of brotherhood. It was perfectly clear to them then what I was doing and they thanked me for that.

There were no more towns that day and I relentlessly continued, writing haiku in my head as I went:

Straight as an arrow
Pedaling across the plains
Wind hard at my side

Thirty miles later and at the very end of the day, I made camp at Mayer Waterfowl Production Area in a small grove of trees on a slight rise above the wetlands. The setting sun turned the fields golden and lit up the prairie as far as I could see. This was in the plains east of the James River.

The prairie was dotted with sloughs, also known as prairie potholes, and these ponds were everywhere. They were certainly popular with homesteaders and I noted how the oldest barns butted right up against them. Where there weren't natural sloughs, there were dug ponds. The water table was that close to the surface.

Aside from the James River Valley it was extremely flat and I thought about what a great place this was for 360 degree vision. I bought a beer in Parkston then found a conveniently placed table beside a Subway restaurant where I could drink it. There was even WiFi. I didn't stay long though and rode on towards the Missouri River.

It was challenging riding, uphill to just before the river and with the wind hard at my side but not in my favor. It was a beautiful ride though.

About five miles past Platte, a town cop passed me and stopped in front of me on the shoulder. It was a smooth wide shoulder and I'd been riding on it, completely separate from the traffic. Nevertheless, several people had called to report a suspicious person. I said, "I'm a traveler and have a right to travel."

He replied, "In South Dakota, you have a right to the entire lane."

He was on my side and didn't even check my ID. I teased him saying that I was going to start calling them about every car, they all looked suspicious to me. We laughed and it was indeed a comedy.

As the day closed, I watched the fields of sunflowers beside the road. They pointed their heads at the low sun and bid it goodnight early as it fell behind thick clouds in the west. Then they turned and bowed their heads to the east, readying themselves to greet the new day the next morning.

There was a campground at the river but it was a US fee area and locked down tight. Across the highway was a parking area, also a fee area, but with an exemption for The Little Chapel which had a sign that said, "Stop, pray, rest." I prayed all night.

There was rain expected the next day and I wished for a rest day. It was my ninth day of non-stop riding. But, after saying my prayers there at the tiny church, I was at that level ready to go.

The climb up the other side of the Missouri Valley was hard, the longest hill I'd seen since Lake Superior in Canada. It was beautiful too, ten miles of forested West River beauty. I liked climbing. It was slower and easier for me to look around.

This was all in a light rain but at the first hilltop there was a field and on the edge of it, a huge horse trailer. It wasn't raining hard but it looked like it was going to so I rested under the deep front hitch. It was a dry spacious room which fit both me and the bike. I ate something, read a book, and started carving the stone that I'd been given in Pipestone. Someone along the way had given me a flint knife and I used that to scrape the rock. This was

the old way, as was having the patience to rest.

It was a long rest too but heavy rain never did fall so I rode on. There was so much beauty and a couple great descents to the last big hill. I coasted. Then it was flat again but a rising flat with mist shrouded buttes in the distance. I was riding in a drizzle which was so slight that I wasn't even getting wet. There had been a lot of rain already that year and it was a green West River like I'd never seen before.

After twenty miles, there was what looked like a DOT shed and I got there just before half an hour of heavier rain fell. Otherwise, there was no shelter for forty miles.

My timing was impeccable and I got to Winner just as another downpour rolled in. There was a city park where I planned to spend the night and I took shelter there. I relaxed at the picnic shelter, read more, and thought about whether to just have a snack or to cook supper. While I was considering that, a couple came into the park. They had two small bags of groceries, a six pack of beer, and the man had a liquor bottle cradled in his arm.

They looked a bit tipsy and stopped at the next picnic shelter like they had to regain their balance. I greeted them from across the way then went back to my things. They didn't stay long and when they got up, they walked past me so I said hello again.

The couple had quite friendly eyes and I wanted them to stop and visit so I asked them for a beer. After looking at each other for approval, they gave me one and we became friends. I wish I remembered exactly what was said between us. I mean, I witnessed regularly and genuinely wondered at how these words would resonate with so many types of people. They were both drunk but the man was a great listener, he heard me and was

present. The woman was a bit far out there but we also shared a wavelength and became friends right then and there.

They sat down and we smoked together. She was from Rosebud, half Lakotah and half Italian, and was also a polyglot who spoke three languages: Lakota, English, and Italian. He was a South Dakota native too, a white man of Italian heritage raised in Rapid City. I really liked them but not enough to immediately accept their offer of going to their home. They had me at BBQ chicken but I did not at all intend to go out into the rain.

Then it poured and the wind came up. The shelter leaked too and it was raining too much for them to leave but she finally insisted that he go to check on their children and bring her back a jacket.

While he was gone, she decided that despite my protests, they were going to take me in for the night. If you ever met a Lakota woman, there was no way I could refuse and I accepted her offer.

It had been awhile since her husband left and there was a reason for her not to walk back by herself but she was restless and needed to go so I went with her. Her husband was just around the corner by then with two of their four children and her jacket.

The names of the children were Jesse, Tracey, Kristen, and Camara. Kristen was twelve and Camara four. The rain had given us a break for the walk but returned with a vengeance after we got inside. It was a nice sized trailer and clean but almost bare. There was no furniture in the living room or kitchen except for two straight backed chairs and almost no dishes either.

The rain poured in from the light fixture in the kitchen which was actually on and Kristen put a bowl under it to catch the drips while Jesse cooked. I sat in the living room watching a movie

with Camara while they worked. We made friends then but the parents didn't notice until later. When they did, they were astonished. Apparently the child never warmed up to anyone, not even her grandfather, but she took to me.

I was there for a reason, maybe for a couple reasons. To honor the bright soul of Camara was certainly one, but the other was more immediately problematic for them. They needed skills on how to deal with a pack and I could help with that: identify the leader and disempower them by not accepting any lies, then focus on the truth. It was some advice at least and they needed that.

This was truly a loving family. They laughed at night before bed and woke up in the morning with the same joy but due to the crisis they were going through, they were on edge. When I woke up early the next morning and started making coffee, Jesse met me in the kitchen armed with a baseball bat. It was that intense for them.

After hugs from Tracey and the kids, I walked my bike along with Jesse to the store. After he bought what he needed, we shook hands. We shook three times until I said come here and wrapped my arms around him. He really squeezed me. Such love. Those were my last hugs in South Dakota although later in the day I shared hand slap fist bumps with some of the young men in Mission.

Between Winner and the Rosebud reservation the traffic was not very considerate, not even with an empty highway and plenty of room for them to pass. One man flipped me off. This was all within ten miles of Winner.

The first village on the reservation was Ocreek. There were two signs at the edge of the settlement. One said, "All Life is Sacred." The other said, "Don't Ever Try Meth." All the dogs of the

village greeted me as did a horse. There were children running around but it was as if the people didn't even see me. I knew they did though. I rode on into Mission.

This whole way the wind was again hard beside me but ever so slightly in my favor. I was looking forward to where I would turn south and become a sail.

There was true brotherhood in Mission too and I shared the hand slap fist bump of comrades with the few people I met at the store. There were no deep encounters like I'd been experiencing except that just as I was leaving the parking lot, a man stopped me to share a few packs of Oreos. On my way out of town, another man stopped offering a candy bar. Little did they know that they'd be feeding the packrats.

The wind was completely on my side from Mission to Valentine and I rode the twenty miles to the state line in one hour. The rest of the ride to Valentine was equally rapid. On the edge of the town there was a man walking beside his four year old son, the boy riding a two wheel bike. I must have built him up about being a good father or even commented on the visible love that I saw between them. I was direct like that and said, "Here we are, normal people rough from the road and we still have love."

The man replied, "I don't usually tell people this but I spent ten years in federal prison in Colorado." He looked the part too but cleaned up nice, looking much more like a dad than a thug. The love he was shining certainly helped.

Pointing at his son I said, "You're blessed to have such a beautiful new life."

The man already knew this and didn't need me to tell him but was entirely grateful that I had. It's how we lift each other up.

There was another family out on the edge of town and I

told the children that they came into the world with purpose, that they could start to see this in the joy that they brought their parents. They looked at each other with love then and heard me, children and adults.

2

Infinite Beauty

Past Valentine, the Niobrara River led to the edge of the Sandhills and I followed the river out of the town into them. I hoped to camp at the bridge but it was locked down tight in private land. Disappointed, because it was late and I was tired, I crossed the river wondering how many more miles I would have to ride. Within a few miles though, I found a more or less perfect spot to end my day. It was on the highway right of way but screened by junipers and far enough back from the road that I could build a small fire to cook supper.

Although there wasn't a bit of traffic, I still had company in the night. As usual, since there was no rain or mosquitos, I was sleeping under the stars and sleeping well until something laid down on my feet. It was small but bigger than a mouse. I'd had mice join me in the night previously and I knew what they felt like. This larger thing had snuggled up across my ankles and onto my feet like it had just found the coziest bed ever. Startled awake, I kicked my legs straight up in the air and sent the critter flying.

That was at three-thirty and I didn't think I'd be able to

get back to sleep, worried that the animal would return. This was a recurring feeling after night time encounters with animals and like always, animals or no animals, I would sleep.

Waking up again at first light, I made coffee and when I began to pack up, I couldn't find the stuff sacks for my mattress and sleeping bag. Usually I put them in the pannier but the night before had simply stuffed them in my front basket and they were gone. There was no wind in the night so they hadn't blown away and I looked all around for them. Finally, searching under one of the juniper trees maybe thirty feet away, I found them half buried in a huge packrat mound. One of the bags was at the top entrance and the other at a side entrance, both snagged on the tunnel walls.

When I kicked the packrat into the air, it likely landed in my basket, the bike was parked right next to me. Then, it must have liked the feel of my camping gear so much that it took the bags to line its den. Under the bags was the candy bar given to me on the edge of Mission and that was missing too. I didn't mind, it was a small price to pay for having interesting company in the night along with a story to tell later.

My story right then was that I was immersed in beauty and intended to do my best to allow for it. Even beyond that, I believed that this presence was crucial. What was life aside from beauty? And the prairie was truly beautiful, a lush version of what I'd only seen in vision at Jeffers, and it went on for miles and miles. There were a few ranches and a number of grazing cattle but otherwise it was unplowed and seemed infinite. I remember being taken by this, astonished by the idea that beauty was infinite.

The riding itself was on a two lane highway with no

shoulder and no traffic. There was a canal on one side of the road and a creek on the other. The grade was gentle and the climb to Merritt Reservoir was easy riding; the beauty made it easy.

The tackle shop at Merritt Reservoir would be the last business for forty-eight miles but for being out in the middle of nowhere, it didn't carry much of anything. They had plenty of bait and tackle, a very small selection of junk food, and a small beer refrigerator. Knowing the long ride I had ahead of me, I thought about getting a beer for the afternoon except that the only singles were simply not to my liking, Amstel Light or something like that. Meanwhile, they had six packs of a locally crafted IPA and I would have loved to have one but definitely didn't have room on my bike for six. The owner came to my rescue though. He bought the pack and sold me two. I mean, we had to warm up to each other before he would do this. My fee was telling him the story of the packrats and then he wanted to know about any other encounters I'd had with *dangerous* wildlife. Rattlesnakes always come up in those conversations and he started with that.

Merritt Reservoir was an oasis. There were trees, shade, and a place to swim. The first campground past the store was primitive but there was an electrical outlet so I sat by the shore charging my devices. Walking around, I found a patch of stinkhorn mushrooms. They looked like morels and smelled just delicious. I wasn't about to eat them although there was evidence of a gourmand at one of the fire pits. There in the ashes was the long stub of a fancy cigar, green onions, and a chunk of ginger. I salvaged the ginger to use for supper that night.

A scientist from the University of Nebraska pulled in to count fishermen. My distant cousin counted fish and I told the man about his book, *From the Prairie to the Tundra*. To count fish,

my cousin netted a certain volume of a lake then averaged the population by total volume. I suggested to the researcher that he could take the same approach to fishermen. We laughed together.

The scientist told me about another bicyclist that had come through there and the rider claimed that he'd lost his billfold. The key part of the story for him, and he told me twice, was that the other cyclist didn't ask for money but was passive-aggressively asking. In telling me this, he was actually saying, "If you need something, ask." I didn't need anything and didn't ask but knew I could. This was friendship.

As I rode on, the beauty of the lakeside astounded me. On one side were all the flowers of the prairie growing on otherwise bare hills. On the other side were trees in groves and forest growing by the shore and then on up the watershed. There were five miles of this and I was truly astonished. It was one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been.

The Sandhills are the largest sand dune structure in the Western Hemisphere and the largest grass stabilized dune system in the world. The dunes rose as tall as 400 feet and the sides were steep. Crossing these dunes was hard riding, as difficult as riding the Blue Ridge Parkway, and until I reached Mullen, I'd be going over one after another.

The beauty was incredible. There were layers of flowers and vistas that made me feel like I was on the Asian steppe. There was so much beauty that it overflowed and I sent it out to those I love. Some of you might have felt this.

The North Loup River embraced me. I'd found serenity swimming in this same river three years earlier and at this time it had much the same effect. I was once again cleaned, refreshed, cooled, and restored although unlike at that time in my recent

past, there were no gorgeous blue eyes sharing the present bliss, only the eyes of the world which easily held just as much love.

Between the dunes were seeps where water rose from the Ogallala Aquifer. These wetlands were filled with waterfowl and cattle grazed beside them, the grasses up to their bellies. I met a very beautiful rancher named Kate who was out with her three year old son replacing a gate. We talked as she worked and it was easy to see that she found the same joy ranching that I found riding. We were friends in that.

From there the terrain wasn't as hard but I was tired from crossing all the dunes so when I reached the Middle Loup River three miles short of Mullen, I was ready to make camp. There was an access lane but buried in the almost ripe plum bushes was a no trespassing without permission sign so I rode on.

The hill up from the river was as steep as any I'd ridden that day but I simply shifted down to my lowest gear and took it slow. The hills don't bother me but the idea of riding even three more miles did. I remembered when hills would make me doubt my path and purpose and I would steel myself chanting, "Make it easy. Let it be easy." I'd been doing just that all day. Now I had to use the same strategy for distance and of course this worked.

Mullen had a little paradise for a traveler like me. It was a discrete spot next to their library with WiFi, water, restrooms, and electricity. It was in town but perfectly liminal, a spot that nobody would ever look in. I slept to the sound of trains passing in the night and dreamt of a dear friend from Louisiana.

I thought about all the beauty I'd passed through that day and before I went to sleep wrote:

Without exception, everyone I've ever met who drove

across the high plains said that it was interminably boring. They were going too fast. It's a fantastically diverse bioregion carpeted with flowers and painted with light and shadow.

My very first thought the next morning was from a song, "Love all, serve all, and remember Jah." Love was greeting me as I woke up and I took it as a natural result of being present in the beauty. It was a worthy result too and hardened my resolve to pay attention. I was thankful for this. It was so rare that I woke up in praise although on a normal day I did begin my meditations right away, even as I opened my eyes.

This conscious immersion in beauty affected my interactions with other people too. After coffee, I rode to the town grocery to get a few things and came upon a customer in one of the aisles talking to a clerk about all the extra ingredients in things, additions that probably are not healthy. They were just wrapping up their conversation but since I'd overheard I said, "With enough exercise, one can burn off anything."

She replied, "I'm in bad shape then."

"Hasn't the exercise craze arrived here yet? Where it has, it increases the health and livability of a community."

"Not yet, but it sounds like a good idea."

Something about her made it clear that she was a woman of faith and thinking along those lines I said, "We should at least exercise our minds. It's necessary to burn off toxins there too."

I continued, "Without exercise, minds fill up with every kind of random thought and some of these thoughts aren't even useful. Minds get so busy that when God wants to talk to us, we can't hear it."

Of course I had been ceaselessly praying as I rode, even

coming awake that morning in prayer. My mind had been getting its exercise and I told her about this. This was rural Nebraska and like most people around there, she was a Christian so I was speaking her language. I said, "When we keep praise in our hearts, the words we speak have meaning. They might even be His. I saw His works this morning, even in you."

The woman understood. There was a certain illumination about her and with every word I said, she got brighter and brighter. I wrote in my notes later that she was glorified and I felt somewhat enlightened too.

This divinity astounded us both. We were sharing a moment and knew it was not from us. It was something other than the conversation. I gave credit where it was due and said, "It's the Holy Spirit telling us something important. Our minds are still now and we can hear this. It's what was promised and no mystery.

"And see how easy it is to let faith become real. We could never imagine this. Like gains from exercise, it might start small but it's no abstraction. It's written 'that they become one as You and I are one.'" This was the verse which I'd heard a week earlier and it was still on my mind. She also knew this red letter gospel.

As we shared the moment, I realized that to profess with your mouth could easily mean to speak from the source through which He spoke. "That they be one as you and I are one." The religion makes such profound promises that I wondered how any less could be true. I didn't feel like it was a religious thing either. It was about living with a sacred fire. Given what I regularly experienced, I could hardly believe otherwise. This meeting in a grocery aisle was par for the course and was also just life. After our blessing, the woman and I were simply shoppers at the store.

For several days though, I'd been meditating about what it

meant to "follow". I stepped out of the world, dumped my preconceptions, and asked myself, "If there's no beginning, then where would you start? Would you start?" I'd let that lyric be my mantra and empty of everything except these questions (and the beauty of course), I discovered fullness. It was no mystery but no panacea either. Still, meeting a heart that would prosper with love, I shared what I had and the result was brilliant. Could this be what it meant to follow?

As I rode on, I thought about how two normal people should have such a true encounter. We didn't talk about spiritual life, we practiced it. There's an esoteric practice of seeing Christ in everyone and that's very similar to what we experienced. We were as holy as everybody else and saw this in each other. It was Truth and heart to heart. It's how the holy spirit, the sacred fire, sings. It was intentional too. The scholars I met on the Atlantic said, "You read about this but never meet anyone doing it."

From Mullen, and after two days of crossing dune after dune, the route turned west and began to follow the troughs between these great waves of sand. I was in the heart of the sandhills and the carpet of flowers had a new pattern, the reds of Indian paintbrush. A cold wind blew hard against me but the beauty more than made up for it.

Most of the region had never been plowed and this prairie was in full bloom, a sea of flowers in an ocean of dunes. I was steadily gaining elevation too and within a few days the mountains would come into view. The grade was easy though, the only obstacle was a cold wind, cold for August anyway, and my fingers started to numb.

Although there wasn't even a building there, a historical marker commemorated where Hecla had once stood - and where

it fell. The next village after that, Whitman, was a run down hamlet with only one *nice* building, the post office. The town was decaying but in a lush setting. Everything was thick and green. There was a lot of beauty in this as if the prairie was reclaiming its sovereignty.

Just before Hyannis was a large quiet fairground and although it was only early afternoon, I'd had enough for the day. The wind was that hard and once I stopped I couldn't force myself to start again. Instead I finished my book, carved pipestone, and rested. It was a long afternoon of being at rest but a needed break. I made a small fire to warm myself before bed and hoped for better weather the next day.

The county sheriff saw me at the store in Hyannis the next morning and stopped to make sure that I knew how far it was to the next services, sixty miles. I was quite in shape for this and pointing it out, teased him about how fat he was. That made him laugh; the only exercise he ever got was walking from his patrol car to an office, or into and out of his house. He also claimed to own half of Whitman which wasn't saying a lot. I asked him how deep the sand was around there and he replied that they'd drilled down thousands of feet and it's still sand. His name was Mike and he was a really nice guy. Everyone in Hyannis was nice and even the coffee at the convenience store was free.

After filling my water jugs, I rode on into the wind. It was still hard against me and on a rising road. The riding would be all uphill and all against the wind for the next sixty miles.

This route was truly brilliant and as I rode along I thought about the other great dunes in our country. The Sandhills didn't have the same austere bareness as Algodones, Sleeping Dunes, or as White Sands but in scale, they put the others to shame.

There were only a few named places along the route and although the distance between them was great, I kept going. The riding was hard and I was strong. There wasn't much of anywhere to stop either but there were historical markers in Ellsworth. The hamlet was founded by a man who illegally fenced five hundred thousand acres of government land. He was caught, sentenced to prison, and died behind bars.

There was an old store in the town too, the first place I'd come to that looked like the Old West. It was a redneck store, a mom and pop operation that sold ranch gear and guns. The front room was large and in the back corner was a sturdy bar. They didn't sell liquor there but the wife was standing behind it. As soon as I walked up, a large rottweiler came out from behind the bar, approached me, put its front paw on my foot, and did the doggy down pose that dogs do when they love someone. The woman's eyes went wide.

The gun room was in the back and standing in the middle of the room was a lifesize cardboard President Trump. The guns were all useful tools though and there were no assault weapons, just shotguns and hunting rifles. I was in the room by myself and certainly felt out of place. Perhaps I secretly wished I had a sharpie in my pocket to give Trump a nice little mustache but I didn't and despite wondering just what these people were like, their dog was good so at some level they were good too.

They didn't know how to take me though. With my long hair and dirty clothes, I hardly fit their image of a red-blooded American but their dog had accepted me. That meant something to them.

There was also a section of books by local authors and I happened to have read one of them, *Miss Morissa* by Maria Sandoz.

When I mentioned this, the man showed me another book which she wrote about her father and then said, "Look at this." There on the wall was a framed letter from the man. He'd found it in a safe which he salvaged from an old building.

Although we made small talk like that, we still hadn't warmed up to each other and I had my doubts about whether we would. Finally, I picked out a snack and the man met me at the cash register. As he rang me up, I noticed a sign on the wall behind him. He taught concealed carry classes and home protection skills. I pointed at the sign and said, "I see you teach people to overcome fear."

"What?"

"If someone is going to protect their home, they have to be centered enough to point the gun. You teach people to act from reason not fear."

He had to agree and all of a sudden looked at me in a new light, almost as if he understood now why their dog had liked me. We talked some more about what it means to be protected and of course, my version of this did not include guns. He also had to agree that there simply wasn't a home invasion problem in that area. Nevertheless, I understood that people had guns and needed to be safe with them so I again thanked him for helping people learn rationality.

When I was ready to leave, their dog decided to come with me. He followed me out the door and ran alongside me all the way to the railroad tracks, stopping there like they were a fence. He sat in the road wagging his tail and watched me ride away.

Into the wind, that's what I rode off into. I was riding into more beauty too but had to keep my head down to reduce wind resistance so I'm not so sure how much of it I actually saw. I mean,

the flowers grew close to the road so even looking down there were colors but it only got harder, particularly after the road left the long valley I'd been following. I rode up and down across the tops of the dunes until they abruptly ended eight miles shy of Alliance. From there it was perfectly flat farmland and I powered against the wind into the town not stopping for anything.

The wind changed direction then and followed me south. This was the first easy riding of the day and six miles or so past Alliance, I was back in the dunes. Although I planned to ride another twenty miles to a rural cemetery which I'd spotted on the map, after only eleven miles I found a perfect spot nestled in the dunes, a nook just out of sight of the road. I laid out my bags and sat there astounded. It was the prettiest little area yet with at least a dozen varieties of flowers blooming, a little stand of currant bushes, and both immediately and in the distance, a landscape painted in wildflowers, the epitome of Sandhill beauty.

After coffee in the morning, I rode on and within a few miles found an old rest area, simply a gravel loop with concrete picnic tables. It was a place to stop but not much of a place to stop. Jeff pulled in while I was resting there and was very excited to find me. He'd met another touring cyclist a few years earlier at a campground on a fishing trip and had thought about him ever since. Like he had with the other man, he made friends with me too. We were men who met eye to eye and it was as easy as that.

The Sandhills diminished from there up to the corner to Scottsbluff. I made that turn into the wind and coasted down to an irrigated land of canals, rich fields, and cattle feedlots. The road followed the very edge of this valley and I was sandwiched between dunes and farms.

About five or so miles into that stretch, here came Jeff

again. I often wrote about the gifts I received and although nothing physical changed hands, his friendship was indeed a gift. We talked for another twenty minutes or so and I noted the envy when he told me about his sixteen year old son. He wanted to travel like I did and said, "I'll be free in two years." This was flattering.

The rest of the way into Scottsbluff was a hard ride. As I mentioned, I was against the wind and this was a major obstacle but giving up was not an option. I realized yet again that I couldn't just stop in the face of a challenge. That would be an even greater obstacle.

About five miles before the town, a man in a truck stopped to offer me a ride and there I was, at the edge of my endurance with an offer of an easy way out. Of course I declined. I was tired but strong and I knew when I was done that on my own power, I would have accomplished something. Accepting his offer would have negated my purpose and this wasn't a choice made from pride but rather from intent. One of my liberations was to go all by bicycle and as hard as it was, it was worth it.

Scottsbluff was big, busy, and stank of industry. The Platte River flowed through the town and was lined with factories both new and in ruins. It was hot out too and when I stopped for shade, the few conversations I overheard were all in Spanish. The people there were workers doing their jobs. That's how they lived.

My route turned south again, crossed the river, and ran down 10th Street (basically Main Street). The business district was small and somewhat deserted. The only people out were my people, a young crusty looking family. The dad, Loki, was wearing a pot leaf t-shirt and walking barefoot, pushing a double stroller bearing two tiny children. The oldest child, Ophelia, was sixteen

months old and could only speak a few words but when she talked with her hands, she could describe the whole world. The little girl was familiar to me too, as if I'd met her elsewhere.

Loki and I knew we were brothers at first sight but it turned out that we had a deeper connection. His mother was an old friend, a rainbow sister named Wyndwalker and I remembered her from so very long ago, in 1984 or 85. It was so far in the past that I couldn't even picture her except for seeing her in her son. Loki was the right age that I might even have known him when he was in her womb. We were family like that and this realization came upon us like the bloom of a flower on the prairie. Wyndwalker was gone though, having died a year earlier on October 28.

Another man pulled up riding a nice Trek road bike. He mostly wanted to show me the bike but he was also a friend of Loki and there together we were all family. In that light of brotherhood, the wisdom of the road poured out. I don't remember exactly what was said but I certainly shared with them my meditations on what kind of beings we might be, beings of light, and there together we were shining. Our brotherhood proved this, at least to us.

In gratitude for this awareness, they both offered me gifts but I was already well stocked and like me they really had nothing except everything and they even tried to give from that. I refused, so again, the gift of the moment was simply camaraderie, the kinship of the heart. We were brothers.

The first truly steep grade of the West was just past the south edge of town, the Wildcat Hills. They were called hills but from the road it felt like a mountain. The climb itself, the steep part, was only four miles long and compared to what I'd later face

it was nothing except a welcome change of pace.

The view from the top of the Wildcat Hills was equally as deep to the south as it was to the north. I could see in both directions far out over the barren plains and thought about the beauty of my route across the dunes. The plains are boring except where they're not.

Then there was a truly great descent to the corner where I would turn west. While I was resting at that turn, a family from New Hampshire stopped to take pictures of one of the first grand buttes. We were kind of surprised to meet there because it was in the middle of nowhere but we were well met. I'd been through New Hampshire, met the Old Man of the Mountain, and knew their state. This made us family as certainly as brotherhood did. They were taking their son to Laramie for his first semester of college and I also knew the area around Laramie fairly well so gave them some tips on what to see, in particular the drive from Laramie to Saratoga.

From there it was a long steady climb towards Wyoming. The route could have been called the ICBM Scenic Drive and I rode by several missile silos. I avoided my first impulse, which was to leave some kind of dramatic anti-nuclear message, and instead rode off towards the sunset. I made camp in an old barn after the barn owl who lived there fled at my arrival.

It was ten more miles to Wyoming in the morning and eight miles after that to the first town, La Grange. I stopped before and above the town at their cemetery. It was very parklike with big cedars, concrete benches, and all the amenities. It was the kind of place that I would have loved to find at the end of the day and was equally useful right then. I charged my devices, used the outhouse, took a hobo shower, then rode into the town.

La Grange was home to the La Grange Bible College which dominated the town. I stopped at the market looking for WiFi and the unfriendly old clerk was pessimistic about my odds but directed me to the library. There was no network at the library but the school next door had one. Unfortunately, it was firewalled such that it wasn't useful. While I was trying to get it to work, I met a very old couple, the woman a graduate of the Bible school in one of its first years in the 1960s. We witnessed together. She had found the glory of God as certainly as I saw the glory of creation.

When I went back to the store, the clerk was equally unfriendly as he had been earlier. Another man came in about then and he looked just like the other man so I asked if they were kin.

He answered, "Kin?" as if he didn't know what that was.

I tried again and said, "Related."

He replied, "No, we're white."

I was getting a little hot by then so I looked at their skin and said disdainfully but eye to eye, "No you're not. You're red." I brushed the dust from my sandals and rode on.

It bugged me after I left that there was a whole town dedicated to the study of Jesus, and when a suspiciously Jesus looking person passed through, nobody offered any kindness. (With the exception of the very old woman who shone with the Light of God).

There was another bright light at the junction with US 85 four miles down the road. An 84 year old man and his wife ran a small store there and when I mentioned La Grange, a look came over the man as if he knew what I'd just gone through. So I told him. In response, he pointed at the wall by the door where there were two framed writings about how we go from eternity to

eternity together, that the only meaning to be gained was that we were in it together. I wish I remembered the exact quotes but both sayings helped define the idea that "They may be one as You and I are one." The man was making it clear that I was welcome.

When the couple understood that I wasn't just bicycling and that I had some kind of purpose, they wanted to make an offering. I refused three times but agreed when they said, "A plate of fruit." The plate they served me had two quarter slices of watermelon, four melon balls, and two cookies. The old man sat down with me and told me about his travels and battles as I nibbled on the repast. He'd met astronauts and presidents, spent time at Second Mesa in the Hopi lands as I had, and defeated pancreatic cancer without surgery.

Then he asked me, "What got you started on this?"

I thought about my reply before I said anything and only one word came out of my mouth, "Birth." That was indeed what got me started and it fit with the idea that we might innately have purpose. The man and his wife certainly did. I explained that my birth name meant the same as my true name, Peaceful Valley Walker, and how the evidence of my life proved it true. It was a path and it was purposeful.

The couple saw themselves in what I'd said as certainly as I did. We were on the same page, we were one, and in that were family. As I tried to leave, they insisted that I accept a sandwich for the road and packed me up a nice ham and swiss with mustard.

It was six miles from there to a modern rest area. The day was hot and windy and there would be many more miles to the next services so I planned to rest for a good little while. Sadie was the young and beautiful caretaker of the park and also a graduate

from the La Grange Bible College. There was some magic between us too; the light in our eyes reflecting a certain unity. We were family like that and she was clearly my sister.

As Sadie and I shared the moment, a beautiful dark skinned woman joined us. She also had sparkling eyes, and when she spoke to her children, I recognized her accent, Caribbean Spanish. I introduced myself and asked her where she was from.

Jame was originally from Honduras and told me about running away to Nicaragua when she was only eight years old. She walked there, eventually learned five languages, joined the US military, and served in Iraq.

Sadie moved the sprinklers around and tended to her chores while Jame and I talked, then returned after the Honduran left. We continued where we'd left off then shared a hug for the road, a hug for Wyoming. I rode on simply filled with this love. She was a shining light and it left me glorified.

Several people had warned me about Gunbarrel Hill, a seven mile hill which began just past the rest area but it wasn't anywhere near as difficult as I'd been led to believe. The most interesting part of the climb was that the wind blew from every direction. After that, it was thirty miles of a steady rise to Cheyenne.

By the end of the day I was at the outskirts of the city. There was a cemetery but I would have had to cap a sprinkler head to sleep there so rode on. I don't usually do this but as I passed a Baptist church, the preacher happened to be outside and I asked him for shelter, even just a place to camp. The church was on a large lot with a back section covered in trees but the pastor didn't even take the time to be friendly. Maybe he was from La Grange too. I rode on.

At a cafe near downtown I was able to charge my device and use the internet. After two hours there I rode on through the night across Cheyenne. There was some kind of bike trail system and a man wearing a pot leaf hat was fishing in one of the parks. The hat had the same pattern as the shirt that Loki had been wearing in Scottsbluff and like with Loki, we were natural friends. His children both had bikes and after they inspected mine, showed me theirs. One of the bikes had pegs and the child told me how much he liked to grind. We were both just that much into our bikes.

There was a park on the far side of Cheyenne but it had a sign which said it was closed at dusk. After such a long day, I rationalized that dusk only lasts about half an hour so it was fair to assume the park reopened at dark. I set up at a picnic shelter, slept well, and woke up early. By first light I was already packed but still finishing my coffee.

A man came around the corner of the shelter then, "Time to move along buddy."

"No problem. I was just leaving but isn't the park open now?" and he just scowled.

I understood the reason for policies but he wasn't being kind so I added as I started to roll away, "Someday you'll be broken down somewhere and a person will come along saying, 'Time to move along.'"

He opened up at that and talked about how for seventeen years he had been running people off from that very shelter then cleaning up their piss and excrement. He said that only one in twenty were respectful and he acknowledged that I was one of the elect so to speak. I rode on unoffended.

My route from there followed Interstate 25 and began at

the back way out of the Wyoming Welcome Center on a dirt track over a private railroad crossing. It was hard to find but once on it, the lane led me quickly to Colorado and shortly joined a blacktop road.

There were no bison in sight at the Bison Ranch but there were camels. Just past the place and right where the pavement ended again, two men from Barcelona, Spain caught up with me on their bicycles. They were day riders riding fast bikes and although we shared a similar adventurous spirit, the contrast between our rides was profound. They were astounded at my expedition setup and we all laughed at how it was like a camel. My panniers were the humps and they carried everything I needed. I would remember this analogy when I reached the Sonoran Desert.

The next twenty miles were on a gravel frontage road. It was a difficult ride because there was no shade and the day was hot. The only places to stop were at a rock formation, Natural Fort, and in the shade from the few underpasses where the road switched from one side of the interstate to the other. The riding was a lot easier after I found pavement again and I pedaled on through the heat to the first town, Wellington. My friend Cornbread was camped at Parker Lake and I took a back road out of town to find him. Along the way I met Jay and Krista who I would see again in a couple days. Cornbread welcomed me to his camp with two fat trout fried to perfection next to a large pile of mashed potatoes. I was once again home in a place I'd never been.

Cornbread saw me as someone with a gentle spirit and he needed someone like that just then. He'd found an injured bird and figured that I was just the one to help. It had a broken wing and I gently set it.

The place was full of people who cared about birds with

broken wings and things like that. I remember Ron Little. He was legally blind but could see well enough to ride a scooter on the paved trails. There was also a young man with happiness. Over the previous year he had started giving less value to money and found a greater wealth. We had that in common and this also made me feel at home.

3

Offerings of Song

The tension on my hammock was perfect that night and my sleep was more restful than usual so it was late when I got rolling. When I did finally leave, I went slowly. Cornbread of course sent me off well fed and my new friends Jay and Krista were driving in as I bicycled out. With their blessing, I quickly reached Laporte and had another nice breakfast: coffee, yogurt, banana, and sweet rolls.

The Poudre River trail led me into Ft. Collins. After even more coffee, I went to the New Belgium brewery. I might have been the only person to ever bicycle from their other brewery in Asheville to this one in Colorado and they honored the journey with a free pint of my favorite variety, the Citradelic.

A young black woman was there from Philadelphia, Claire. We became friends when she realized how well I knew her city. To me, Philly was alive and vital and as I described my experiences there, it made her feel at home. Our friendship was bright too and I loved the light in her eyes, so brilliant as to make me shine.

When I left, the manager followed me out with a mixed

twelve pack. My first thought was that there was no way I could accept it. My bike was overloaded and as I started to tell him this, I realized that there was another solution. I accepted the beer and spent the next three hours giving it away. There were a lot of transients in the city and I intended to make sure that some of them were happy. The first few cans went to some dirty kid travelers outside a rescue mission. This was just in passing. Then, a few blocks away, I saw a familiar face. The brother and I had met three years earlier at the Black Hills rainbow gathering. We witnessed about the magic of the road and had no doubt that this was a basic feature of existence. As Rob Brezny said, “The universe is conspiring to shower us with blessings.” We were the proof.

From there I was in a pedestrian zone and walked my bike. As I went past a patio cafe, a man wearing a youth activities hat and shirt caught my eye. I walked past but within twenty feet turned around knowing that I had to talk with him and that I could easily start a conversation. I said, “Nice hat brother!” and as I honored him for serving the youth, we became friends.

Mark was a veteran and the things he experienced overseas changed his life. He felt that if he had learned about hope and inclusivity when he was younger, that he would never have fallen for the war. His vision was to establish mentoring networks for at-risk youth, something similar to the Big Brother/Big Sister organization. Ultimately, what I admired about him was that he had any kind of vision and acted on it. This is exactly what I had done and I told him about others like us; Vic Gonzales had the vision to start a boxing academy for troubled youth and did it. Although Mark already believed in himself, hearing about others gave him confidence. All together, we talked for two hours about heart consciousness, direction, and intent. When everything was said, he wouldn’t let me leave until I agreed to walk to a bank

machine with him where he withdrew forty dollars as an offering for my journey. With his gift, I would eat at a unique Mexican place on the south edge of town later.

There were still a few beers to give away and I found more willing people to take them as I followed the bike trail out of town. Then, a bit farther on, I met another brother, an extremely drunk Buddha. He could hardly talk but was in such an altered state that he took me in all at once. He said, "You don't have to tell me the whole story." He understood as much instantly in our eye to eye connection as it had taken two hours to share with Mark. As I rode away he said with approval, "I know what you're doing."

I replied, "It isn't easy," but he had sent me off with a nice gift of the legal Colorado smile and that did make it easier.

By then it was well past mid-afternoon and I'd only ridden twelve miles. I didn't feel very strong at that realization but knew that if I set into it I would and I did. I made rapid time to Loveland but didn't ride very far past the town when I spotted a state game area that was a likely place to camp. I knew it would get harder to find a spot the closer I got to Longmont and Boulder so I stopped to check it out.

The park was down a long lane and just a short way along the drive was an apple tree dropping fruit. Lucas stopped while I was gleaning and wanted to know if I needed anything. I replied, "No, look at these beautiful apples. The universe is feeding me," so he drove on in. When I rode in, I found him, thanked him again for stopping, assured him that I did have everything, then asked him if he needed anything.

He replied, "Yes, prayers."

I laughed and said, "Prayers are my specialty but fruit grows best in fertile ground. If you want an effective prayer you

might have to prepare the ground.” I continued, “Your brain will hear any words I say but unless they reach your heart, they’ll be as good as useless. This is the ground which you will have to prepare.”

Lucas didn't quite get this. The example which came to mind was odd but would turn out to be quite fitting. He had already noticed the little toy forward scout which was mounted on the front of the bike. I said, “My heart was so open when I found the toy that it came to life. Within twenty-four hours, a real live forward scout was before me and we smoked together, we were brothers. I’ve seen what’s possible and I insist, prepare the ground.”

We went our own ways then but in thinking about him, he reminded me of a brother who had done some really bad things. Lucas was like this other man but still on the good side of potentially bad choices. I didn't get a chance to tell him this but he had a friend with him in her own car and she stayed after he left. She had to show me that they'd also just found a small green soldier, the same type of toy as the one in my story. Finding this had astounded them and he was so overcome as to leave. She was astounded too and came back to hear more.

I said, “Lucas didn’t know who I was but he stopped in the road to see if I was okay. That showed me that he had a good heart and that he acted from it showed me what side he’s really on. I mean, he didn’t seem to know how good he really is.”

She replied, “You helped. Finding the evidence for ourselves helped too. Now I believe in miracles. I’ll tell him what you said.”

My miracle that night was a discretely located shelter where I could inflate my pad on concrete next to a picnic table. It

wasn't perfectly discrete though. At least there weren't any restrictions posted and I felt a little more secure than at the last site because of that. It takes a lot of courage to sleep free and I wondered if helping Lucas gave me some sort of pass. Having done my job, surely I was granted a peaceful rest. I drifted off to sleep in the comfort of that promise.

Behind the suburbanization of the transportation corridor which lays before the Front Range was a countryside filled with hobby farms and smallholdings. It had the feel of an almost gone Colorado. The times had changed though and west of Longmont I rode past unguarded fields of marijuana.

There was a very nice gravel trail between Longmont and Boulder and once I reached that, I would follow bike trails most of the way to Colorado Springs. I was ready for peace away from traffic too so when I got to the trail I took it slowly. The path followed a creek, then a canal, and went past prairie dog towns where the critters weren't afraid of bicycles.

The trail dropped me out near the Boulder Mall and I made my way to a cluster of dirty kids with big dogs and tarot cards who were sitting at the top of it. I'd been going there for decades and not much had changed. There was a smoking ban, but it was like that the last time I was there too. Also the same was that the kids ignored the rule and I rolled on when a cop came up to make them stop.

A little farther up Pearl Street but past the mall I met Matthew, one of the original Timothy Leary acolytes. We saw ourselves in each other and wanting to explore that reflection, went to an alley for a smoke. There were two Hispanic men with a pushcart there. Matthew bugged them for a soda, as if they should just give him one. While he badgered them, I bought coco water

and then they gave him his drink. This was all in Spanish. I learned the language traveling and Matthew learned it serving a year in a Mexican prison for selling pot in Mazatlan.

Matthew and I were a lot alike, free spirits with insight. He saw beyond the world with psychedelics while I tested the boundaries via single-minded meditation, unending exertion, and purposeful surrender. I said, “We are birds in the morning who sing beauty into the day. Around this we fly,” and when I put it like that his eyes dilated and I could almost see Leary’s reflection in the lens. He remembered singing beauty into the day and understood me with his soul. I assured him that he was still singing and together we honored our songs.

My next stop was Denver but first I needed electricity and found a suitable deli with a shady patio on the edge of town. I aimed for the table next to the outlet just as a young man came out of the shop and aimed for the same spot. Nothing else to do but become friends so we sat down together.

My new friend paired vintage patches with vintage shirts and his Etsy store was a hit. He showed me his work and it was as good as he said. He loved doing it and was a perfect example of what we can accomplish with purpose. I was mostly interested in how he got into it and heartened when he said that he was simply bringing his dreams into reality which made me think once again about how much I admired people with vision.

After the artist left, a young man who was just then touring the complex with a culinary marketing class saw me. I mean, the class was in session in the store and he ditched it because our attraction was so magnetic. Maybe it was the tie dyes. He was wearing a Dead and Company shirt and I had my brightest hippie shirt on. In some manner like that we were drawn

together, and when we were, we found out that we were natural friends. He cut class to join me on the patio for a bit. This was different than with the artist. The boy and I were brothers at first eye contact. He was young, sober, and bright but reminded me of the old drunk Buddha I'd met on the path the day before.

Leaving from there I met two more men. One was free, homeless in other words, and was disabled. The other was an entrepreneur and excited because he'd just bought two pizza ovens mounted on trailers and was going to take them to Arizona, one for Bisbee and one for Tucson. It was interesting because the men were friends, good friends, but of very different socioeconomic backgrounds. We were all brothers though and we hugged, the disabled man struggling to his feet so that we could wrap our arms around each other.

There were several good bike routes from there but I wanted the one with no cars, a bike trail that went all the way to Colorado Springs. It was hard to find from where I was at but once on it, I could sneak through the northernmost suburbs of Denver with just two miles of Pecos Street to the edge of downtown. From there I would take the South Platte River Trail. It was dark by the time I got that far.

There was a traveling man at the junction and that's what he called himself saying, "I'm a traveling man," except that I didn't think that he knew how to do it. His few possessions were spread among several bags and even all put together would have been too much to carry. With my load tight on my bike and mobile, he was pretty well forced to look at his own burden but couldn't.

The next man was already unburdened. He was wearing all he owned and despite that minimalism was well prepared. If I'd

lost everything, within days I would have been just like him and somehow this made us know each other. Although we had never met, we weren't strangers. He introduced himself as Gregory but told me his real name was Lionheart. We'd both seen how maintaining integrity with our soul purpose had unlocked a door to a truer world. We shared example after example of this courage until well after dark.

Less than a mile up the trail, but across the river and under a bridge, a man was playing a guitar and I went across to listen. What he was playing was really good and when I asked him what else he could play, he named a bunch of instruments when I'd really wanted to know what other songs he could play. We laughed. He could play anything and showed me. We were friends.

I rode on and on into the night. It was about fifteen more miles to more state game lands where I hoped that I'd be able to camp and it was a long easy ride past factories mostly. The river had a stink like sewage treatment chemicals though and I wanted to get past that but never did. Aside from the odor, it was a great ride.

There were at least eight people out on the trail on that stretch, all living from their bikes. One couple, each pulling overloaded trailers, had just been ousted from their sleeping spot. He was hoarse from them yelling at each other and also kept grabbing at his ribs. She said he'd been hit by a car.

The state land was just past all the various city limits of the many suburbs and quite adequate for a stealth camp. I was asleep by midnight.

The long day before took its toll and in the morning, I only made fifteen miles before I was done in. The climb up the South Platte wasn't a hard grade but was against the wind. I didn't know

why I was so tired. I was rested, fed, and hydrated which made it clear that this was a different kind of problem, one to which I knew the solution. I wrote about this strategy then:

I sang, "Earth my body," and even as I began the song, the words came into my heart and I knew it was true. I was the planet, manifest in being between surface and sky, nourished by the fruit of the land. I was fed and strong, nurtured, and even more than that, made of Earth.

As the next line rang out, "Water my blood," I felt the rivers flowing in my veins. I was hydrated and my cells swam. I thought of all that flows through me and tore down any dams I found. I pressed harder into the climb and welcomed the sweat, the flow. The relief was actual, I wasn't even through the first verse and my condition had already improved.

The third line was, "Air my breath," and the wind came into my face filling me with love. I knew that love was often in the wind but for this feeling to arise just there, climbing the mountain, this surprised me. I breathed it in though, both the love and the air, breathing it in deeply. I literally envisioned this breath of the mountain absorbed by the cilia in my lungs. It was the fullness of the line, *air my breath*. There was also a certain harmonic relationship from breath to pedaling, and conscious of this, the fatigue faded away.

With, "Fire my spirit," I thought about the few encounters of the morning. There was the man who figured out what I did in Mexico even though I didn't tell him directly. I think I told him about how the people in Mexico would ask me if I was traveling alone and I would reply, "No, con Dios." Next was a beautiful young woman who lived next to her work. She let her heart open as I told her what I did and she understood. This was another blessing. Then there was a postal carrier and two men who took a picture. These three became my friends.

Another man told me, "The lycra riders just might be the crazy ones," when I said that I was different from other riders. This was my fire, random interactions where I found kindling ready for flame. I rode with purpose and intent resulting in effect. I knew that it was worth it and this realization strengthened me, it kindled my fire.

Earth my body,
Water my blood,
Air my breath,
And fire my spirit.

It was a spell and I used it to great effect. The fatigue returned later though. It came back after every rest. It was real and the song didn't change that. However, it gave me the focus to ride on without doubting my ability or cussing out the mountain. I simply rode and made the top.

Another factor affecting my meditations was that the Platte River was an ancient path, a highway across the plains, and the Garden of the Gods was ever the destination. As I had at Jeffers, I would go there in a sacred manner. The song was more than a focusing aid, it was a prayer. It hardened my intent and I carried it with me, it was me.

After climbing all day, and just over the top at 7,300 feet, there was finally a place to camp. I was truly exhausted. Too tired to even coast the last fifteen miles down the other side.

In the morning, I woke up in a new land. Magpies welcomed me to the day, a bird I hadn't seen anywhere north of there. The sight of them made me feel at home and the pass was truly an entrance to the Southwest.

It was a long ride downhill on the New Santa Fe Trail to Colorado Springs. This was a gravel path that ran through a

verdant pine forest, much of it on an Air Force Reserve military base. The plains, foothill, and mountain ecosystems all met there in a profusion of life and I hardly had to sing of the elements to be profoundly placed.

There was a large and welcoming bike shop at the edge of the city and Kate stopped me before I even went in. She was a local cyclist, a petite older blonde with a brilliant smile. Everyone liked her. She was so likable that I would meet more of her friends over the mountain the next day. Her smile wasn't what I stopped for but it was one of the best gifts of the day. All I really needed was a new saddle, I'd worn the old one out, and the bicycle shop marked one down for me.

The Garden of the Gods was full of very touristy tourists. I was equally awestruck as any of them but it was hard to find space for unity with the land there. There were so many people and it was only at the far edges that I felt the sacredness of the place. From there, I could imagine all the previous generations who arrived in reverence.

On the way out of the park I met an older, well off couple from Texas who were as equally above and aside from all touristic impulses as I was, fellow watchers. We saw this in each other and our hearts opened. Together we witnessed the presence of divinity in creation and it was visible to all three of us.

The spirit path I'd followed to Red Rocks led on to Manitou Springs and it called to me. I had the day but I didn't have the energy, still fatigued from riding up the Platte. There were other mountains to climb too and if I'd had the ears to hear I would have even then heard the songs which called me in their direction.

There were two travelers flying a sign at a Walmart. The man was blond, shirtless, and wearing shorts that kept falling

down. He held the sign, (whatever it said), but was green at it and his technique wasn't working so I gave him some tips, mostly just to smile but also to stand at the exit, not the entrance. People give after they shop. He took my advice, hitched up his shorts as he crossed the lot, then smiled bright like I'd taught him. His girlfriend was drawing mushrooms on the tailgate of their beat up old SUV telling me about their old life in Michigan while she worked. They had dreams for the future too but couldn't see them very well just then. My advice for her was the same as for him, "Smile."

Below Walmart was a no man's land populated by the dangerous, desperate, crazy, and brave. I reckon I was among the brave so went on down the trail only stopping when Jeremiah said, "Hey." As I squeezed the brake, he added, "Got any clear?" I had to ask what that was and of course he was looking for meth. No judgment. I looked at him and saw a brother.

He was young, in his twenties, a handsome native man from the Dine nation. Despite his quest for drugs, he made a good impression and I asked him if he would like to smoke weed. He agreed and as we walked on, he explained that he was the adhd type, a Ritalin veteran who calms down on meth.

When we reached a spot where we could sit together, I got out the beer I'd bought to fortify myself for the mountain ahead and he brightened with a look of longing at the sight of it. I opened it, handed it to him, and he took a good hearty drink, carefully stopping when he'd sucked down just less than half of it. Then we sat down to smoke and I told him my history with the Dine. I walked from Tucson to Big Mountain for his nation in 1984 and they know me there. I also used one of their songs in my meditations:

I walk on a rainbow trail
Singing a rainbow song
All I see around me is beauty.

He spoke his language, knew his traditions, and knew the song. We talked about the difference in meaning of the song between our languages, finally agreeing that the song was better interpreted as “Walking this trail of rainbows, the song is of the path and the beauty is ever present.” Before we parted, he gave me another song which he learned from his grandmother. It was in his language and he didn’t tell me what it meant but he sang this for me.

A little farther down the trail two men at a bench stopped me to ask for foil. I laughed at them that they had drugs and no way to use them. The guy who asked me didn’t even see me, not as I am, but his friend did. I answered the plea in his eyes and gave them a piece of foil. It was right at hand and they were already digging their own graves. The no judgment thing was harder with these guys and I was happy to roll on.

Around the next curve was a man holding a bud in one hand and a pipe in the other, complaining that the pot was bunk and didn’t work. I could help with that and gave him a puff of what the drunk guru had given me a few days earlier. That definitely worked. Stoned, we talked for an hour. I explained how we were present in paradise living our eternal lives and I used the evidence of what was visible in our hearts to prove this. He could hardly believe what I was saying but knew that it made sense. We weren’t strangers on a bike path, we were brothers, together drinking the living water. Everything said arose from this.

His name was Giovanni and he was an arranger who set lyrics to music at a nearby church. He sang me a few of his compositions and then surprised me by singing Psalm 23. That's the psalm that had been with me since childhood and which I associated with my own name, Peaceful Valley Walker. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." When he saw how touched I was, I explained and he taught me a rhythm to tap out. Then we sang together and he brought me into the song. While we glorified the creation like that, another man came up. He had a beautiful smile and looked like a jazz pianist from the fifties. He gave Giovanni a small bag of marijuana and didn't say anything except that it was his own. That weed presumably would work.

My work was much easier after these gifts of song despite the rest of the trail feeling like an avenue of the abandoned. Past Giovanni, I didn't see any more people but there were many camps, some still occupied but most abandoned and the remnants of them scattered across the forest floor. Plastic trash lay everywhere. I was surprised that the city had given up such a prime recreational amenity to this squalor.

The bike trail ended at the edge of the city and I rode highway 115 uphill around the base of the front range. There's a big arc of the mountains there and the southeast slope was occupied by Fort Carson. There was military land on one side and colonists on the other. A grand view over the Arkansas River drainage as it flowed out into the plains showed me very clearly just where I was at. I'd hardly ever seen such a strategic spot.

My fortress was immediately before the top of the climb amid red sandstone boulders. This was very close to the highway but private because of a guardrail which blocked the view from

most of the traffic. Only a bicyclist like me would have even noticed the entrance to the spot and even then, it was discrete. Derek was on a bicycle too, on his way to Argentina, and he could see me, but only after he was past the trail. I was perched cross-legged on a boulder eating my supper by then, the sight of contentment. He tried to join me but there were brambles between us, I was that well protected, and he didn't want to backtrack to the entrance I'd used so we wished each other well and he rode on.

As I breezed down the other side of the hill in the morning, I thought I heard a voice but didn't see anything. Ten minutes later, Derek caught up with me. We were the tortoise and the hare but for a few miles rode together. At the first side road, we rode back into the desert, sat on the earth, smoked together, and shared our stories.

Derek was a disabled veteran and spent most of his time cycling. The year before he had ridden from Oklahoma to Alaska and back, riding ten thousand miles in two hundred days. The conversation was a little tedious because he went on and on about how much money he made every month and about how little he spent. As we got back on our bikes I jokingly said that since he was so rich, he could buy me breakfast at the next town. Saying that must have bugged him because he held back after that, he was definitely faster than me, and we drifted apart. I stopped when I reached a very busy cafe and he pulled in after me. I told him I was just kidding about breakfast and he replied, "I know that," but he left me there hungry. There were still brambles between us.

The cafe was busy, a sure sign of a quality place, and as I waited in line to buy what I could afford, a cup of coffee, the woman behind me struck up a conversation. She was a bicyclist

too and so were her companions. When I got to the counter she told the clerk to put my bill with hers then invited me to join her and her friends.

There were two men and two women in their group and both women were named Mary. All four of them knew Kate, the woman with bright teeth who I'd met in Colorado Springs the previous day. They were fascinated with the tale of my journey and understood it from the perspective of themselves having ridden many road miles. One of the Marys gave me a small offering before we all left, nine dollars.

A superstore in Cañon City had WiFi and I went to the employee break area to use it. There were two tables and a steady stream of employees taking their breaks. They all went to the other table from me except for one older woman who sat at the far end of my table. I was writing and still meditating, at peace from my ride, and without even realizing it opened my mouth to let a little bit of the song from my heart out. The woman smiled, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Thank you."

Farther into town at a convenience store where I was buying a beer to go with my lunch, the clerk warned me about Veterans Park, that there were homeless people there who claimed the place for their own. I replied to his warning, "Looks like I have work to do."

A man with crazy eyes and a big knife greeted me at the park. He asked if I'd like to smoke and at my assent we went to another table away from the teens that he was sitting near. When I told him what I'd heard about the park, he laughed. He commented on his own eyes, that he knew they gave him a crazy look. I had no problem accepting him as he was but it wasn't just his eyes, he couldn't focus. He got out weed and a pipe but never

did load it. When a woman came into the park, he was lost to me, there were skirts to chase. He had just enough attention left to give me some of the weed and then sauntered off. I ate my lunch and drank the beer.

Jim, a sixty year old ranch hand, stopped me in the parking lot as I made my way back to the highway. It was a case of mistaken identity though; he thought I was somebody else. We became friends anyway but as we talked I could see he wasn't feeling well. I asked "Are you okay? Would a smoke help? I have some weed."

Jim was a recovering alcoholic and life on the ranch where he worked and lived protected him from all temptation. However, he'd finally been paid, went to town, and spent the previous night with the ghost of his past. Now he was nursing a hangover. He said, "I'm trying to come back to myself."

The mention of weed brought an amazing amount of life back into his eyes though and I quickly prepared a joint to share. As we smoked I asked him, "Why not come back to a higher self?" As was my practice, I was seeing the beauty of him which was far beyond his conception of himself as flawed. We have flaws, all of us do, but we are not our flaws. I had plenty of examples of this and the doobie was hearty enough for me to share several of them. This message profoundly resonated with Jim and he replied, "You should start a college."

While we talked a woman named Stacy walked by with two beautiful dogs. I stopped her to ask if I could meet her companions and the animals were pure friendship, they liked me. At their acceptance, Stacy lifted her sunglasses so we could look eye to eye and in this sight we saw a mutual reflection of beautiful souls. We hugged before she walked on and this was electric.

There was a dynamic connection as true physically as it had been between our eyes. Seeing this, Jim was even more certain of my qualifications to found a university. We laughed in brotherhood, he was feeling that much better and as suggested, was returning to a higher self.

The highway past Cañon City turned north and climbed up what the locals called Five Mile Hill. At the very top of the grade, the manager of a campground was out front with a lost dog, a blind shih-tzu. They had already contacted an animal shelter and were about to take the dog there and I had arrived just in time to hold, comfort, and share healing with it before they left. As I finished my break, another long distance cyclist came by, Xavier. I hailed him and he stopped.

Xavier and I rode together for the rest of the day. He'd started in Lawrence, Kansas and my familiarity with the town sparked our friendship. From there, we barreled down the big hill to the Arkansas River at the speed of traffic. We had to ride the brakes to keep from passing the cars in front of us. This was a spectacular descent.

The next thirty or forty miles were all uphill, a gentle uphill that felt almost like a magnet was pulling us to the top. We were following the Arkansas River through a deep canyon towards Salida. Xavier and I were certain friends by then but he didn't have any food with him so I invited him to camp with me and cooked beans with onions served with bread for supper. He kept me talking for hours and was a great listener. His conclusion was the same as Jim's, that I should found a college. I was just that comfortable that I could expound on things.

The first hint of light the next morning woke me up early and I left before Xavier but he passed me half an hour later.

Somewhere past there, I got ahead of him again but didn't notice because he was stopped somewhere. He caught up with me at a cafe later and repaid the meal of the night before with a full breakfast. We laughed about how much of a tortoise and hare experience we were having but this time it was in truth; he had a rabbit tattooed on his shoulder.

After a shower at the rec center in Salida, I rode up to Poncha Pass, climbing from 7,000 feet to 9,010 feet in less than fifteen miles. It wasn't as hard as it was difficult. There was a wind too and it was cold.

4

Cities of Gold

A cold rain woke me up in the morning. This wasn't horrible nor unexpected. I was at nine thousand feet and there's weather at those elevations. Despite the drizzle, which was probably more of an immersion in a cloud, I would be riding downhill for at least a hundred miles and my mood was bright. After all the climbing I'd done, the thought of coasting was such a relief that the weather didn't bother me at all. I woke up, put on some layers, made coffee, then coasted all the way to Villa Grove. This was a hippy town and the employees at the cafe were bright-eyed and ponytailed. Everyone was friendly too, but somewhat distant; there were no conversations and after a quick cup of coffee I rode on.

The rain had stopped by then and the riding was easy yet the lack of connection at Villa Grove had soured my mood. I'm certain that I was expecting too much. Everywhere I went there were profoundly meaningful interactions and I needed to learn how to simply enjoy a moment of beauty without having to dive so deep. Joyful Hot Springs was the next stop and likely a

reminder to check where my heart was at. Was I joyful or not? It's a measure of how bothered I was that I didn't read the sign that way.

Soaking at a hot spring is a certain cure for most maladies (like my mood) but a day pass was fifteen dollars and if I had that much, it was only just barely. I'd just bathed in Salida too and felt quite clean enough; I'd have to find my peace some other way. Before I left though, I went to a smoking pavilion on the grounds to collect my wits before riding on. As I puffed on my cigarette, a young man joined me. He was a contract nurse working out of Gallup and his next assignment was in Olympia, Washington. I watched his gears spin as he realized how he could combine his current lifestyle with some variant of the life I was leading. I mean, he took contracts and could easily space them out so he would have time to travel between them. Until just that year, he'd spent his entire life in Hazelton, Pennsylvania.

The San Luis Valley holds the highest desert in the country, mostly over 7,500 feet in elevation. It's a flat sagebrush desert lying between two major mountain ranges. Although I was still riding downhill this was only at a very slight grade and wasn't the long coast which I'd been hoping for but it was easy riding. The valley widened out as I continued on and I was astounded at the expansiveness of it all.

There were very few homes or buildings and no trees but there were some ranches and near one of them I spotted a calf stuck in the fence. I of course dropped my bike to set it free. It'd been stuck there for some time too, long enough that the rest of the herd was gone. She was easy to untangle, stuck more in the mind than body. It was much easier than untangling a horned goat from a square fence.

Helping the calf did nothing to improve my mood but I was still aware of all the beauty. Between the surrounding mountain ranges there in the high desert I felt above it all and was placed. It was sort of an inside out view. The mountains around me were above me but I still felt on top. I welcomed this perspective but my mood was still black. In addition, it was a two lane road with no shoulder and five times people passed against me where I had no option but the ditch. I cussed at them but held the edge of my lane and came pretty much back to myself.

Much farther down the road was a turn off to the Great Sand Dunes National Monument and there was a well situated parking area right at the corner. It was a spot off the road, out of direct sight, and perfect for an extended break. Topping it all off, my heart brother Ken and his friend Sarah were there from Rochester, New York. We'd never met but were in truth family. Some of the evidence was that Ken and I had fourteen mutual internet friends. The fact that we *did* know each other, eye to eye, was equally telling.

Ken had the misfortune to have been a witness to the shooting of Smiley and Dice in Florida. Smiley was killed and Dice was paralyzed right in front of him. There was some healing for him from the fact that I knew the family well and from offering Ken my observation of the light I'd seen in Dice's eyes as he was carried to the main circle at the Vermont gathering in 2016. We hugged and cried over this then sat on the ground and smoked. Ken gave me a beer and we drank together. There were tangerines involved too and also a pack of crackers. It was a heartfelt moment with family.

From there to Alamosa was fourteen miles, far enough to find that meeting Ken and Sarah had entirely lifted my mood. I

was back to myself. There was a bike trail on the edge of town which I followed to the Rio Grande where I made camp in the riparian area below the trail. My nearest neighbor was a fat porcupine that waddled as it walked. There was a rodent nearby too and it was harvesting ripe seeds from a plant by shaking it and making the seeds fall. I never saw the animal but I eventually knocked the plant down so it could more easily get at the seeds.

Alamosa had a convenient place to charge my electronics and with that task completed I continued on. Within a few miles of the town a new phone was laying beside the highway. It was fully charged, unlocked, and completely unused without any personalization. Unfortunately, it didn't have a back, but otherwise was in perfect condition. Even without the back plate, it was worth keeping for redundancy. I knew well the importance of having multiple ways to build a fire.

Riding South, the fire was in the land. It wasn't burning but the landscape was so dry that it looked like it easily could. The woods along the Conejos River were green though and so inviting that I imagined how I would love the place if I lived there. It was a vision of being at home but I didn't stop until Antonito where I bought some supplies to make sandwiches.

The buildings in Antonito were of adobe and the wood fronts were falling from them. Three old men sat outside one of these decrepit buildings, it was a cafe, and I teased them about how pretty it was on the river compared to right there. All they had to say in reply was that it was the winter that was hard. That's all that was said and I'm sure there was some wisdom shared in this exchange if only from the twinkle in our eyes as we spoke.

There was wisdom at a windswept plaza where I went to make my lunch too. As soon as I parked my bike, a man came up

near me saying under his breath, "To treat a chief of the Kiowa like that..." and he pronounced it key-o-wa.

I didn't ask him how a chief should be treated but simply said, "Brother, would you like a sandwich?" He smiled and we became friends. He had a small bag of fruit at his side with a few apples in it. He'd been gleaning. Later I told his friend Mark that Ray let Mother Earth feed him and I meant with more than just apples.

Ray spoke many languages. When I said friends, he echoed in Lakotah. "Kola." He also spoke in Spanish and French. The languages were all mixed up though and it made it difficult to understand everything he told me about the surrounding mountains and the orbs of light that lived among them.

While he told me of the land, his friend Mark arrived and as we sat together to smoke, another man and woman walked up. The woman had tears in her eyes and was saying, "Why didn't they just shoot him in the leg?" Their friend had been shot to death the day before as he burglarized a store. They said he was a good kid mixed up in bad things. Later, Mark showed me a picture of him and he was indeed a nice looking young man.

A beautiful pit bull with its tail between its legs came up after we smoked together. I talked to it but it went away only to return a bit later with an old glove in its mouth and its tail raised. It wanted to play. It took a few minutes to realize that the dog only understood Spanish, then a few more minutes for me to remember how to say *venga* [come] and *siente se* [sit], then we played.

Along with the fruit, Ray had two large books with him, *The Book of Valor*, which he opened to a page showing a warrior of light in a golden forest, and the book, *History of Western Settlement*,

which opened to a page about finding the seven cities of gold. The way he showed this to me was as if to say that I could find the city of gold or maybe that I already had.

In this rich moment, I felt out of time. Ray, Mark, and I were brothers in a circle and we all felt the significance. Mark was a parent and the death of the burglar affected him. He worried about his own children and about his culture. He said that there had been more than nine hundred burglaries in that area in two years. We all talked about intent and about keeping purpose in the heart then parted with hugs. Our council, these few moments together, had been a felt prayer.

On the far edge of the town was a shrine for the Virgin of Guadalupe. It was built into the adobe fence of a small casa next to the highway. This place of reverence reminded me of Mexico and perhaps it was a portal into old Mexico. Inscriptions painted onto the wall of the shrine described a vision of the Light of Christ, that the Virgin was the ark of the new covenant. One sign said, "She brings the light that shines in the people who walk in darkness," and this was much of what I did; I saw the light in people who thought they were in darkness, like I'd seen in Lucas. Over and over again, I'd watched people come more fully into the light simply by reminding them that they also had a spark.

San Antonio Mountain, one of the largest free standing mountains in the world, rose before me. Ray had told me about the peak and although I didn't understand what he said, (except that there were orbs of light which flew around it), I met her. She was not masculine and San Antonio was a misnomer.

There were clouds above the peak, and between them was an image, a function of reflection perhaps. To my eye it was the Virgin from the shrine I had just passed but it was also the corn

maiden and this was perfectly clear in my sight. Across the Rio Grande and in the distance the entire Sangre de Cristo range stood like sentinels. Before them, Ute Mountain was similarly illuminated, the sister of the misnamed San Antonio Mountain. All that Ray had said came clear in this sight. The mountains of course talked to each. He saw it as light and I felt it like a sight.

Crossing the pass was in a physical way as profound as the visionary sight. The wind hit me over the rise, blowing out of a rainstorm. I had to ride across it, break through the storm, and continue on the other side. The rain chased me through this portal but was entirely unable to catch up. Within a few miles the sky cleared, illuminating before me the three rocks of Tres Piedras. My friend Terry, who I'd last seen in New York City, lived near there and the rocks guided me home.

My dear friend and heart sibling Brightwings was there too. They were one of my best friends at the Oregon gathering a year earlier and it filled me with joy to see them again. We were family. Later they wrote, "I remember how your eyes lit up to see me, and how I felt like your sister in that moment; I remember how you told me my fear was reasonable, and that you were glad I could suspend it in your presence."

This shared essence, our common loving humanity, was a certain example of the principles of kinship which I was practicing. It was more meaningful with Brightwings because we knew each other but it's also exactly what was shared with strangers and they all surrendered to kinship. This was central to my mission, we are family, and the proof was unassailable.

The mesa was at 8,500 feet and very cold at night but warm with the love of deep friendship. I rested, hiked in the barranca, helped dig an outhouse hole, cooked, told stories, and

watched a milky way so close that I felt that I could walk in it. I wrote:

Night of billion stars
Milky way, big dipper, Mars.
Sky highway, no cars

Back on earth, one of my certain skills was making perfect pancakes and on my first morning there, I proved it. Two days later both Brightwings and Terry demanded a reprise. The secret to my cakes was a certain proportion of blue cornmeal, rye flour, and wheat flour. Loaded with raisins and sunflower seeds, they were irresistible. Topped with butter, gourmet jellies, tahini, and local honey, they were a delight and the perfect fuel for continuing my journey. Nourished like that, hugs were shared and I rode on south.

The Rio Grande was far below me to the east. I couldn't see it but could see across it towards the Sangre de Cristo Mountains which I would watch all day. Tres Piedras was in high sagebrush country at 8,500 feet and I would coast down to 5,800 feet at Espanola, passing through a huge forest along the way. It would be a long and beautiful day.

The beauty was so magnificent that I stopped at every opportunity to immerse myself in it. From Tres Piedras it was a long way to the first town but there were several roadside groves, every five or six miles, and all with access to the forest. This was my kind of riding and with all the peaceful stops I would end the day well rested.

Two old ponytailed men joined me at my first stop where I was resting under the trees. They were simply stretching their

legs but there was also a shrine where someone had died and they were paying their respects. I approached them and asked, "Did you know her?"

"No."

This surprised me. People pass these small monuments so fast that they don't even see them and at my speed, I'd read so many names. Because of this, that they had stopped meant something to me, "Thank you for honoring the dead."

"Of course. Somebody died here."

"I know. I just thought that I was the only one who read their names. Thank you for even noticing it."

We all puzzled out the name of the victim, Sarabeth. The memorial was formed from small horseshoes, a hard font to read. One of the men made out the last name right away though because it was the same as his. Sarabeth was only fifteen when she died.

Chips and a beer were only five bucks at Ojo Caliente and I leaned against the building to eat and drink. It was a busy place and as I sat there I listened to the men talk. I'd of course heard Spanglish before but never so proficiently, and I wasn't sure if there were rules or customs about which words to switch but to my ear it was musical, a symphony of culture.

As I sat there, a man pulled in driving a classic old camper. After he fueled up, I said, "Nice truck."

He replied, "Thanks. I just bought it. I took my wife camping two weeks ago, tent camping, and the air mattress deflated. She woke up on poky rocks and was beside herself saying that that was the last time she'd ever go camping."

I laughed and said, "She is going to love this camper," and

he knew it was true.

Then he changed the subject and said that he drove a delivery truck and had seen me a couple times as I rode down from Colorado. This would have been before I rested at Tres Piedras. For some reason this had him pull out his billfold and he gave me a five.

I blessed him then and added, "Thank you. This will be helpful."

The Rio Chama was beautiful. There were hardwood trees and pastures thick with grasses and flowers. It was also more settled with homes near the road where up until there it had been almost all wildlands: desert, forest, and mountain. I followed this delightful valley to the edge of the Rio Grande and stopped for groceries.

Espanola was on the other side of the river but I would stay west and turn off the main highway to go through Santa Clara Pueblo. Somewhere in the pueblo was a place where I was able to charge my devices. While I rested there, I watched a young man try to sell crosses. The relics were simply two sticks tied together with twine and he had four of them. I saw him sell one for a dollar then approached him and asked, "What is it you really need?" He looked really tweaked out.

He replied, "I think you know what I need," and he looked me in the eyes and added, "I know you've been there."

Well I hadn't *been there* but he was right to know that I understood. Somewhere inside I silently cried for him a little bit and offered him some herb but that's not what he wanted. Just then, someone came up to hire him to wash their car at the carwash next door.

From here I was immediately above the Rio Grande and

followed it to the intersection where the highway turned to Los Alamos. There was cover right there too, trees in the right of way just where the road began its climb. After a full day of descent, I would wait until morning to rise.

A certain peace had rested on me all day. I attributed some of it to the warm departure from Tres Piedras, some to the enchanting landscape through which I'd ridden all day, more to the people I encountered along the way, and after looking at all these factors, there was still some other comfort. Perhaps it was the comfort of stillness. As I rode I prayed and only left room for beauty. This was the core essence of my peace. I wrote:

Penniless pilgrim
Pedaling perilous paths
Pursues peacefulness

The long steep climb up the canyon wall into Los Alamos the next morning proved to me how much I needed this peace. How could I make it otherwise? The road was cut right into the cliff and I took it all at once, only stopping when I reached the mesa top a mile before town. This was at a trailhead for the Canyon Rim Trail, a short path which would drop me at the first city park.

In the park, a man and his family were having a breakfast picnic at a pavilion. There were three women, a man, and a few children. They were all speaking Russian so I said, "Dosvedanya," as I passed by them. Little did I know that I'd just said goodbye. I went to a different pavilion for a short break and later, the man would teach me how to say hello, *privet*.

The man, seeing that I was taking a rest there, escaped

from his family and came over for a moment of brotherhood. He was a nuclear physicist from Russia and had worked at the National Lab in New Mexico for twenty years. His work was with the very physical side of nuclear physics. Later I would meet a theoretical physicist too.

The physical was quite obvious in this man. For one, he was built well and in fact kept in shape by bicycling. His arm was in a sling just then though. That was the other physical thing about him. The injury was from a bike accident. An oncoming car had turned right in front of him and he went flying. He planned to ride again as soon as he was able.

The theoretical physicist was at a little place across town where I was able to drink coffee and charge my devices. He showed up just as I was leaving. I'd hoped for this. I wanted to disabuse myself of any faulty notions that I held and related some of my experiences, framing them in light of the double slit experiment where we find that observation quite profoundly affects results. I saw the light in people and when I did, they lit up. Could there be a theoretical basis for this?

My new friend agreed that there was a certain indeterminable but active nature to things and some kind of spooky potential in relationships. He was also surprised that I'd met anyone else in the town. He thought people there were way too reserved to pass time with a traveler but understood how I'd broken the ice by greeting the nuclear physicist in Russian. I offered that this might be more evidence of a quantum effect. The question on my mind was what contemporary theory looked like at a macro level and I supposed that we would hardly know how to describe it even if it was observable.

This led into another big question about what is

measurable. All of this came up and so did his billfold. Out of the blue, he whipped it out and handed me twenty dollars. This was measurable and a gift which I could not refuse, a manifestation of an existent potential. All I could say was, "Thank you. This is very useful."

It was still morning and there was yet another mountain to climb. The mesa where Los Alamos sat was only the first step in a grand rise. Simply getting to the far edge of town was a workout and I climbed through the Los Alamos National Laboratory grounds, then across the shoulders of the mountain, and finally to the corner which would lift me to the Valle Caldera. Every bit of this section was hard, an uphill slog, and I was glad that I'd made it so far this early in the day. The climb took all the energy of the morning.

There was an old building with a big overhang at my corner, a tiny thing which might have been an information booth or guard shack at one time. It was threatening to rain so I was really grateful to find it there. I mean, I'd just tackled a huge climb and this place looked like such a reward. There were two young women on bicycles already resting there and when they looked at my load, they gave me two caffeine candies in consideration of the road ahead. That was my first clue that my challenges were only just beginning. As I took stock, I looked up the road and kept looking up the road. It was steep, I could see the first mile of it from there and it was steeper than steep. It looked impassable even though I knew that I would pass it.

After a good little bit including a couple cigarettes, a sandwich, and both of the candies that the women had given me, a motorcyclist stopped. He gave me accurate information about the road ahead such that I would know when I reached the top, and

he'd paid attention. That was all I needed to steel my resolve, good information. I was almost ready to go by then anyway but had to wait while the mountain was pounded by a small hailstorm.

The next four miles was as extreme as it looked. The road gained more than a thousand feet of elevation in that distance. It was so hard that the normally too steep sections were a relief. I rode the first two and a half miles without stopping but after that, it was stop or fall over. It was a matter of breath and recovery time and I didn't waste any time off of the bike. I was going to ride it; pushing would have been much harder. I understood the principles involved and later that day wrote:

For stability,
Resistance and momentum.
Effort rewarded.

The top was every bit of the relief that I might have hoped for. It was raining again but the forest there was thick with tall firs, one of which became my umbrella. As I waited it out, and in between traffic, two coyotes crossed the road about seventy-five feet away. I don't think they saw me. The ravens who also were watching the road definitely saw me and one perched to one side of me then flew and perched an equal distance to the other side. I greeted the birds and we talked. They'd seen the coyotes too.

It didn't take long to recover from the climb and I quickly rode on but stopped almost right away to enjoy the bliss of a magnificently bright double rainbow.

Within a mile or two there was another pullout and a couple who were already there waved me down. They had passed me as I struggled up the hill and were amazed that anyone could

bike that, much less with a heavy load. The woman was deaf and her partner translated everything I said into sign language. The woman offered me food but all I would accept was a bottle of water. While she was handing it to me she noticed my mirror and was struck by the idea that I could watch my back as I rode along. She was so excited about mirrors that I gave her my poem:

The mirror it lies
True reflection is in eyes
With love realize

Her partner translated this as I spoke it and I was simply astonished. There was my poem, said without words, and the motions were beautiful.

It was about a mile from there to the inside rim of the Valle Caldera. This is a supervolcano that exploded ten million years ago. and the caldera spread out below me, a lush grassland surrounded by forest. It was immense and what looked like mountains on the other side were actually in the middle of it, lava domes that formed since the ancient eruption, some as recently as fifty thousand years ago. The far side of the caldera was not in view.

The highway followed the inside rim of the huge crater and the route was significantly easier than everything else that I'd ridden that day. I was exhausted from the climb yet lifted by the majesty. That it was finally easy to ride again downright tickled me. Traffic was light too and one of the few cars that passed had a personalized license plate which read PASION, along with a "Spirit Led" bumper sticker. The car, and the two women riding in it, were waiting for me at the next pulloff. I complimented them on

the sticker.

She replied, "Did you see the license plate? It's with passion that we are spirit led. I'm going to make it into stickers."

There was hardly anything I could add to this and I of course agreed, amused that my own words were on her tongue. It was validation and encouragement. It placed me in some kind of heaven too, a land where the message was already alive.

The La Concha fishing area was along a stream and surrounded by fir trees draped in moss. There were two vehicles there. One was a very steamy running van. The other was a truck owned by a family that was having a picnic. I approached the family, the whole area echoed with the laughter of one of their children, and I thanked them for brightening the world.

There were three or four children all together and after I prepared my camp between a boulder and the creek, I met the whole family. I'd come up on their oldest boy, a twelve year old, beating a mullein stalk against the bridge. I almost walked by but stopped and told him about mullein stalk candles. The mother was fascinated and all the children were interested too so I gave a small workshop on plants pointing out several which were growing right around us and explaining their uses.

It was already cool by then but soon started to get cold. I gathered wood for a grill fire but even the dry wood was damp. I got it burning but had to blow on it or it would go out and it made a lot of smoke. Eventually the two young men in the van came to see what was causing all the smoke. They stopped short of me but I beckoned them on and made two new friends. We talked about art theory and I read to them from my work. It was cold out and being entertaining warmed me. Before they left, they each gave me an offering. Twenty dollars from one, three from the other.

About then the dew dropped and everything was instantly drenched. I'd never experienced a faster dew collapse. There was a lot of moisture in the air. I put my shelter up and slept warm but it was a very cold night and morning. The encounter with the passionately spirit led women was still on my mind and when I awoke, it was to thoughts about purpose. The beauty of the wilderness filled me with peace and emptied me of the crap, a lifetime of crap. Empty, I could be filled. I wrote:

Mountainous morning
Meaningfulness manifests
My meditation

And my meditations that morning went on and on. It was so cold that I didn't want to ride until the day warmed. By midmorning it was still cold but by then I was so restless that I left anyway only to stop within a few miles for a short hike at a creek. The edge of the mountain wasn't far from there and as I descended the temperature rose.

The clerk in the store at La Cueva had a very bright smile but he didn't really notice me until I struck up a conversation with another customer. I'd asked about Spence Hot Springs and the clerk was the only one with any answers. He told me that the springs were no longer hot, that they'd been downgraded to a warm spring, but that there was another spring which he gave me directions to. Something about this conversation made it clear what kind of work I did, the cultivation of brotherhood, and he said that he did the same work. With that he offered me a profound gift of a hot towel and water for washing my face. He said that it would be soothing and a comfort. The feeling of this

was as if he'd anointed my feet with oil.

Spence Warm Springs was near the top of San Diego Canyon which I would follow back to the Rio Grande. The springs were merely warm but still incredibly beautiful. The water flowed out of a small cave and into two large pools. In the cave, the water was therapeutically warm with some other quality about it. It was as if I was in the cave of an oracle but my mind was free of questions nor did I have any boons to ask for.

There was a lot of geothermal activity between Spence and Jemez Springs. The most striking was at Jemez Soda Dam where calcium carbonate and travertine had precipitated from fifteen hot springs forming a bridge over the Jemez River. It reminded me of the large formations at Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone.

Nearing the town of Jemez Springs, I admired the dozens of rock spires which stood far above the town against the canyon walls. They were like spirits, ancients. The town itself was a place beside place and Tibetan prayer flags decorated homes, sanctifying them. Retreat centers made it clear that the village was aware of its own presence.

I bought lunch somewhere in town. The hard climbs of the day before, then the cold night, had taken a lot out of me. I'd also earned my keep entertaining the boys from the steamy van and I figured it was a good way to spend their money. With the meal, I was recharged.

The canyon got even deeper from there. It was wide and the walls towered above me. The land was all National Forest and about every three to six miles was a public fishing area. I stopped at every one.

Past the forest was the Jemez Pueblo and I admired the

native fields. I could see that it wasn't the same type of corn grown in Iowa and it was planted differently too; the rows weren't perfectly laid out such that expensive farm machinery could roll through it. They were traditional fields of the ancients and the ancestors looked on.

Past the pueblo and at the bottom of the canyon was the town of San Ysidro. I rode through only stopping on the far side of the town for a cold soda, then rode on into the desert. It was late by then and I was looking for a place to camp. There was a BLM trail but it was impossible to get my bike on it. A few miles farther down the road was a sign for White Mesa Bike Trails and this was perfect. I didn't go very far back in, only to a large pinon where I was able to string my hammock among the branches. I fell asleep watching the stars.

It was twenty easy miles from there to the edge of Albuquerque. The route went through a beautifully ungrazed desert on pueblo lands. There was a back way around the city and which followed the very west edge of the suburbs through mostly undeveloped high desert. There were a few outlying neighborhoods and beside the road in one of them was a small pile of gifts: a mostly frozen bottle of water, a bicycle pump, a baggie holding a knife and two dollars in change, two partial packs of cigarettes, a lighter, and a sealed banana nut muffin. I ate the muffin and stowed the rest.

After some time I reached a more developed area and stopped at a superstore. While I charged my phone at the employee break tables, two different homeless men came by looking for snipes. I gave the first man one of the partial cigarette packs that I'd found by the road and he sat down with me. He didn't say much and smoked both cigarettes that had been in the

pack. This wasn't enough tobacco for him though. When one of the store workers came out, he asked the man if he could buy a smoke. The man, in the most dismissive voice replied, "No." He was the type who blatantly ignores anyone who looked homeless, people like me and he looked at both of us with disdain. I took it as a challenge. I mean, I wasn't there asking for anything and struck up a conversation with his coworker, talking about bike camping. The first man acted like he wasn't listening, he'd already judged me, but I saw him reconsidering me as I talked. We didn't become friends.

It was very hot out but while I was riding, I made my own breeze. Then I got a flat tire, my first flat since Minnesota. I fixed it in the shade of a wall, only there realizing how hot it actually was that day.

At Paseo del Norte there was a man selling watermelons and his sign said that the watermelons were blessed by Jesus. I couldn't ride past that. He gave me a slice and it was indeed sweet but the blessing part was a slightly weaker and cheaper gimmick than to sell *Ice Cold* watermelon. While I talked with him, my tire went flat again.

By then, after more than two years of bicycle travel, I'd repaired many tubes. I patched them until the valve stem broke but this time the patch had failed. The only thing different was my glue, a tube that I'd picked up in Sioux Falls which I had then called a gift. It wasn't much of a gift though because it didn't work but it took me quite a while to figure out that that was the problem. I glued, waited, pressed the patch on, and it just wouldn't stick. I tried the old trick of burning the glue after spreading it. That didn't work either. My mood was good though. I was in the shade patching a tire and present. While I was working,

a woman stopped to buy watermelon and seeing me, approached with a donation, five dollars, the price of a tube.

Since the watermelon man had been using God to sell his slices, I had to tell him how I'd just been blessed. I had been sitting there working on my bike, thankful that I had shade, and in truth, my heart barely wavered through all of this although I did eventually let out an expletive when the patching again failed. I was grateful though: for life, for beauty, and for watermelon. So I told the man that God notices a heart full of praise and that He had just then handed me money for a new tube. I wanted to share my reality that we are blessed, even in adversity. He gave me another slice at that.

Although I suspected it, I still didn't realize the glue was bad but gave up on the tube. I figured it was unrepairable and that I'd have to get a new one. The superstore I'd stopped at was five miles back and there weren't any other options closer. There was a place to hide my bike but it was a very busy intersection and there were too many eyes. I waited most of two hours until it was almost dark and then made the ten mile walk, five miles in each direction.

My heart dropped when I got to the store. I'd walked all that way and couldn't find any tubes in the size I needed. They had every size labeled and no 700 mm shelf space at all. Call it a miracle or whatever but in the 14 inch tube section were two tubes, 700 by 32, just my size. They didn't have patch kits, which is what I really needed, but I bought the tubes and left. The walk back was the same distance but didn't seem nearly as far. That was a great relief and I slept well under the tree where I'd left my bike.

When I woke up in the morning, I found myself with a

great view of Albuquerque and something about the sight tugged at my memory. Three years earlier I'd made a collage called *Breakfast with Uncle Sam* and this exact scene was the background of the composition. As that connection came to me, I could almost see the figures from the artwork hanging in the sky. The memory had me visualizing a great prayer for Albuquerque, that everyone would wake up with peace in their hearts. It was an offering for the soul of the city and the prayer would resonate, returning to me high in the mountains of Arizona.

After installing a new tube, I rode on to the Petroglyph National Monument headquarters. There were no petroglyphs on the grounds except for one spiral that looked like it was part of the landscaping and which probably was a reproduction. There was a map to the ancient sites though but they were mostly behind me. The one section of the park ahead on my route was closed. Seeing where the sites were, I knew from my walk how they were on an obvious route up from the Rio Grande, another ancient path.

The idea of the petroglyphs really tuned me into reverence too. Ancient nations supported by their environment revered their home and made it sacred. They were placed and I, centuries later, felt that place. Their lives resonated into the future.

My future was getting myself the rest of the way through the city. After a donut and yogurt breakfast at a grocery store, it was only three more miles to the last steep hill up which I would climb to an empty desert. Three quarters of the way up the hill, I got another flat. I pushed the bike almost to the top where there was a bit of shade and sat down to fix the new tube. That's when I figured out that the glue was bad but I kept trying until the tube

was finally empty.

Some men in a truck stopped. They had a shop there and offered me air but I of course had an air pump. I only needed glue. They pointed at a used car place and said, "Talk to Joe."

Joe indeed had a mostly empty tube of contact cement and was happy to give it to me. Unfortunately, it was gummed up and useless. I put the flat tire back on the bike and pushed it all the way back down into the city. My mood was still okay but I started to call the city Albusucky because it had sucked me back in.

On my way out of the city with my eyes on the road ahead, I hadn't noticed that the desert was full of camps, mostly consisting of old mattresses barely hidden behind brush. Walking now, I saw the people too.

Finally down the hill, I stopped at a fast food joint for WiFi. That's when my mood was at the lowest. I was ready to be rescued. Couldn't somebody pick me up and take me and the bike to a bike shop, not just repairing the tires, but restoring the whole rig? I was snapped out of this wishful thinking by a man, who likely sensing my mood, said, "Don't blame it on the Indians." He was mestizo and pretty dark but arm to arm I was darker. We tested our brotherhood like that, arm to arm.

Although there were no nearby bike shops, an auto parts store had patch kits and their rubber cement selection was top notch. I would soon discover that a patch set with it was permanent. So I fixed both tires out front of the store; the other one already had a slow leak too.

As I worked, two men arrived and tried to install new wiper blades on their truck but didn't have the right tools. I had just what they needed though and loaned it to them. As we were both working, a homeless man walked by looking like he was in

outer space. The men gave him a look of incomprehension as he staggered past. I explained, "Looks like we failed him boys and he's not the only one. It's a faulty system." We were all sad at the man's fate.

Then a man named Vernon came out of the store. He had a couple bucks in his hand which I could see he meant to give to me. Before he could offer I said, "There are a lot of people out here asking. I'm not asking."

He replied, "I don't have much but I like to help when I can."

I accepted his gift then, assuring him that it would indeed be helpful. It was that important to him. We became friends.

After I had my tubes patched and the tires remounted, I rode the bike around the parking lot barely willing to believe that it was fixed. While I tested it, the man who had sat down with me while I charged my device asked for a favor. He wanted me to go in the store for him and get him a pint of vodka saying that he would let me keep the change. I tried to help but the store wouldn't accept my ID. All I had was my passport. I gave the man his money back and rode on.

It was near the end of the day by then but I was going to get out of the city if I had to ride all night. It wasn't that late yet but I did end up riding into the sunset. First I had to climb back up the big hill then I power rode for another fifteen miles. I felt like I was escaping from a flat tire nightmare.

As I rode into the night, I didn't know how far I'd have to go but there was a bright light ahead, the Route 66 Casino Hotel. At the exit I went back east on a dirt road beside the interstate. I crossed a wash, then followed dirt tracks to a spot above another wash. When I finally found a spot, there were more shell casings

on the ground than there was gravel.

In my notes, I wrote that I camped at Cielo Colorado (red sky in English) but I can't find any reference to that by maps. I wonder if I heard the name from the shooters I would meet the next morning. The sky wasn't red that night but there was a light dancing in the sky above the interstate. It reminded me of what Ray had said about orbs in the sky and also of what I had myself seen in Arizona in the eighties. I woke up to another flat tire.

After some kind of breakfast cooked over a fire, the repair of my newly punctured tube, and a successful passage through the cordon of early morning shooters out to blast the desert, I had a twenty-five mile stretch of Interstate 40 to ride. I remember watching the mesas that extended south from Mesa Redondo, entranced by them. They were so attractive that I might have turned but had another route in mind.

At Laguna I left the interstate and rode on Old Route 66. I was on a back highway riding against the wind, in my element in other words and with the road to myself. The only other person I saw along that stretch was walking. The man was drunk, dehydrated, and on the edge of sunstroke. I couldn't understand anybody being out there without water and it was lucky for him that I came along.

After a few more miles of interstate and just short of Grants, I turned south towards El Malpais National Monument. From here I would follow a five thousand year old lava flow all the way into the reserve. While I rested at the entrance sign to the park later, a man with a home built camper stopped and told me that the campground was full. I didn't rub it in but reckoned that that wouldn't stop me. It was almost the end of the day and time for me to find a place to stop.

The first feature in the monument was called Sandstone Bluffs and the road to it was gravel and steep. Seeing it, well, it had been a long day already and I absolutely did not want to make the climb. I had to ask myself when enough was enough and the answer was, "At the top." I took the road. Part way up a car dusted me out but I met the driver later. He was kind and his dog was named Cassidy.

I asked, "Cassidy from the Grateful Dead song?"

"Yes."

Very goodnaturedly, considering that we'd danced to the same songs, I chewed him out for dusting me on the road and let him know that there was a penalty beer fee for not slowing down. He gave me my beer and we laughed together.

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5

Fruit of the Mountain

The Sandstone Bluffs in El Malpais National Monument were a perfect place for a discrete camp. It was at 7,300 feet with a view over an eight mile wide lava flow formed from eruptions as recent as five thousand years earlier. Across the flow was a long chain of dormant cones that followed the continental divide. The desert was as green as it gets and that was very green. Meanwhile, the limestone of the bluffs stood out brightly above the black of the flow and this vibrant tableau spread out to the south for miles.

The view was so profound that I was hardly bothered to find another flat tire when I woke up, the first of three that day and my fourth day in a row of flats. At least this time I found a wire in the tire, a proximate cause, but it wasn't at the same location as the puncture. I was heartened though to find that my other new patches were melded to the tube. None of them failed.

While I was repairing my tube, a tourist family pulled in and offered me water, a great gift in the desert. For some reason they told me where they filled their jugs and it was from the casino at Cielo Colorado. I laughed that the water from there had

caught up with me.

My second flat happened in a parking lot as I was leaving La Ventana Natural Arch. I caught it deflating and was able to ride back to shade for repair. I rode on but no more than a mile later, the other tire went flat. I pushed the bike about a mile to the next patch of shade and fixed it there. All of this was in the midst of great beauty. I was between the bluffs and the lava flow, at the boundary and blending of beauties.

The Narrows Picnic Area wasn't much farther but by then an intense heat had set in. I rested there in the shade of a shelter, cooking lunch: tuna and ramen. There were three older people at the next picnic shelter and I watched them as they took pictures of each other. It was striking because I could see the lovelight of the couple as their friend made the shot.

They had all known each other a long time. The two women met when they were four and together they'd met the man when they were only fourteen years old, almost fifty years earlier. These lifelong friends were from the north of England.

The old friends didn't know I was watching them pose and it was only after their photo session that we met. A cooper's hawk flew in and perched near my shelter and the man came over to take pictures of it. While he was shooting the first hawk, a redtail hawk flew in and he captured that one too. Neither species occur in England so he was very grateful that I could confidently identify them. Meanwhile, there was also a bluejay which was screaming, "Watch out for the hawk in the tree!"

Past Narrows the bluffs disappeared and the road curved away from the flow only returning at the Lava Falls Trail. This was the final feature in the monument. I'd already passed the trailhead for the path across the entire flow and imagined with

longing a complete traverse so finding this shorter trail was a delight. I parked my bike and made my way out into the lava field by following rock cairns.

The flow was the youngest earth which I'd ever walked upon but although it was only five thousand years old, there was already plant life: shrubs, wildflowers, and cacti. Near the edges of the flow, a few trees had established themselves and all of this grew directly from the rocks.

It was a confusing landscape and without the cairns it would have been easy to get lost even so close to the edge of the flow. The rock was frozen into the forms which remained from the molten rock cooling and the trail itself led to a solidified fall. The stones there had all the form of water plunging into an abyss.

The day was still hot and the temperature out on the rocks was brutal. I had my sombrero though and from some of the many crevasses, cool air billowed out. I kept searching for an actual cave entrance but also kept the cairns in mind. I knew it was important to keep track of just where I was at.

Unable to find an entrance to the underworld, I returned to the trailhead, warmly greeted by a small group of hikers along the way.

There were more people back where I'd parked my bike, an older Christian couple. They cared that I was there and wanted to make sure I had everything I needed. Perhaps they gave me some water, and this was much appreciated, but they cared even more about my soul. This was somewhat from the instruction in their religion to spread the word but also because they sensed something. I knew just what they were seeing too and saw it myself. It was the Light of Christ, or unity in brotherhood, or the sacred fire. In our everyday lives, we don't have words to describe

this even when it is felt strongly. I knew how to explain though and said, "He asked his father, 'Let them be one as you and I are one.'" That's what we felt, the beauty of this unity. We were one and together our tears fell, tears of joy.

From there, my unity was with the landscape. The next twenty miles were treeless grasslands. I had the road, the sky, a flat expanse, and a relentless sun. Wildlife, like me, were free in this environment. First I saw two elk, then an antelope, then eight more antelope. Unlike me, they could hop the fences while I couldn't get my bike over them and there was no place to stop even as the day drew to a close. I rode on into the night.

When I at long last reached an area with side roads, these were all gated and posted but I checked every one. Finally, there was a private road with only a cattle guard and no gate. I crossed over and made camp next to a large pinon tree not knowing what beauty I'd wake up to the next morning.

The sun in the morning illuminated a line of volcanic cones which stood on the continental divide. This early morning light lifted the color of all the landscape. There was no dew but I remember everything being sparkly as if there were. I took a photo of this scene and the quality of light which I'm talking about is only hinted at there. The light visible in the picture does stand out as a promise of the day to come and it was vital like that, not static. (The static image, the photograph, is my desktop wallpaper and I look at it every day. The morning was that beautiful).

Another beauty of the morning was the pure isolation. I was alone in the desert but doing quite well with food, water, and every other comfort. The nearest decent grocery store was a two day bicycle ride away in Arizona and I knew that I wouldn't run

out of anything before then. There were also small places between here and there including just across the continental divide in Quemado.

At the Lightning Field building in Quemado a Vietnam vet had me gripping my bicycle seat as he told me about a car chase which began in Mexico. There were gunshots and narrow escapes culminating in a desert crossing of the border away from any customs posts. His wife and infant child were in the car and they drove through the fence. He told me what it was like to be wanted and what it was like to have to hide.

There was nowhere for me to hide and past Quemado, the only places to stop were quite out in the open. Resting at the entrance to a side road, a scientist working to restore grasslands stopped. We talked about everything but mostly she wanted to let me know how astounded she was by our present environment. She said, "This area is never so green this time of year."

This part of New Mexico, despite being desert, was indeed green. The grasses of the desert had enjoyed a good monsoon and probably had late rains too. Although there were some ranches, there was more grass than cattle and the land was wild, shaded in places by fifteen to twenty foot tall juniper and piñon trees. The day was overcast too, cooler than it had been over the past several days and the riding was easy. With the milder weather and the beauty, the miles flew past and I made it almost to the state line.

There was an old rest area eight miles before the border and I reached it just before dark. It was rustic, as in having no restrooms, so anywhere hidden was also soiled. I loved sleeping on the ground but carried a hammock for situations just like this and a lone mesquite had a long arched branch perfect to string it from. There were also quite a few packrat dens and I didn't want

them cuddling up to me like they had in Nebraska so I was perfectly content to sleep in the air.

Arizona rose before me in the morning with an outstanding view of Escudilla Mountain, the third tallest mountain in the state. I would be on the side of that mountain before dark.

The final eight miles to the state line were a relatively level ride across a plateau, the same as it had been since Quemado. The land changed at the border though and I rode up and down long ridges from there to Springerville.

There was no good WiFi anywhere in town but I was able to charge my devices and restock groceries. Somewhere along there I met a forest service worker who assured me that once I turned south, there would be no problem finding a place to camp and even recommended a certain road which I never would find.

From the edge of the town it was all uphill, up the mountain. Once I reached Nutrioso Creek the grade would be a bit easier and I would be in the ponderosas. Getting that far was a struggle but there was a certain reward along the creek. First there was a long stretch of riding through a box canyon, then around a curve, Nelson Reservoir. Despite the elevation, the weather was perfect for a swim. The water was cold but the lake was like a bathtub filling the valley to its edges where steeply forested walls rose to plateaus.

While I was dripping dry from my dip in the cool water, Jessie and Derek pulled in hauling a modded out dune buggy. Not only was it pretty, it looked like it could go anywhere. Meanwhile, they admired my ride as surely as I liked theirs. Seeing it made me remember Algodones Dunes which I'd first seen two years earlier. I had no idea that within a few months I would be back there.

Anyway, the men, who were in fact adventurers, by then had figured out that what I was doing was hard, extreme even, and we laughed together in exhilaration at the idea of doing hard things. There was brotherhood in this.

My hard work for the day was not done. The grade was indeed easier along the creek, mostly because it was consistent, but it was still a significant climb and before the afternoon was over, I wrote one word in my journal, "Fatigue."

I remember how tired I was when I finally got past all the private land. The forest road which the worker in Springerville had told me about was supposed to be right there but was nowhere to be found. There was another road though, FR666, a road that was more suitable for high clearance four wheel drives than for cars. It would have been fine for bicycles too except that it rose steeply through a thick dark forest and was too steep to ride. I pushed my bike far up into the woods.

After supper the elks started singing then bugled all night. It was a clarion sound, like a high trumpet playing three resounding notes. Two hunters stumbled out of the woods to this tune and were astounded when they saw me with my heavily loaded bike clear up there. Like Jessie and Derek, they respected it when people did hard things and the fact that I was right where they found me was proof that I could do anything.

The men told me where to find a spring and before the day ended, I followed their directions, walking three miles along animal tracks through a tangled forest to find a water source that was much purer than the clear water flowing near my camp. Both were suitable for my purposes. This was at 8,025 feet about two miles as the crow flies from the top of Escudilla Mountain.

At the time, I must not have known that there was a

campground just three or four more miles up the highway. There was that word in my journal too, fatigue, and I honestly might not have been up for those last few highway miles the night before. I'd had the strength to push my bike up into the wilderness though. Anyway, I was happy to find the campground in the morning. I could at least make another coffee.

Donna was there. She was sixty-seven and a hiking enthusiast. When she looked up from her coffee and saw me, she smiled and offered to make me a cup, then served it alongside a bowl of homemade granola with soy milk. She was going to climb the mountain and although it was a day hike, she'd done many overnights all around the world. She admired how I was carrying my load but I was actually learning from her. She even made her own trail foods and before I left, gave me a dried stew with vegetables from her garden. I would eat this for supper that night.

Alpine was also nearby, only another four or five miles. It was a small town but had a library where I would attempt to connect again. I hadn't found a reliable signal since Albuquerque and my luck was no better here. There was a network but it didn't work. Libraries were useful long before Wi-Fi though and I found a book on their book sale shelf: *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck. This was fitting. There was no wealth that could disturb my wealth.

The treasures that day were beyond anything I'd ever seen. A beauty so profound that it could have answered the question of where was the most beautiful place. The mountain was alpine, at elevations above eight thousand feet, and the riding was hard, crossing several different watercourses. The culmination, at 9,200 feet, was at Hannagan Meadows which I wouldn't reach until the end of the day, a day of creeks, ferns, and flowers.

Somewhere along there I met John Vorstein from Duncan, Arizona. He was hunting with three young men and although he was an old redneck rancher and I was from hippie roots, we knew right away that we were family. I never saw him again but always held him in my heart. He might even represent to me all of the people that I've ever met like him but there was no multitude here. The roads were quiet and there was nothing but beauty.

After many more ferns, snacks of fresh watercress plucked from the stream, and yet more climbing, I finally reached Hannagan Meadow. As I mentioned, this was quite possibly the most beautiful place ever. It was also home to a low key eco resort and at the place, I was able to buy a beer and celebrate a successful climb. Jeff joined me while I drank. He was traveling with a friend who was right then out scattering the ashes of a loved one. We toasted to lives of beauty and brotherhood.

From Hannagan Meadow, the highway rose even higher, climbing even right to the edge of the Mogollon Rim. I'd been looking forward to this. I figured that from the rim it would be all downhill to the low desert and that my struggles were over. Those illusions were put to rest at the first viewpoint, Blue Vista. Below me lay a tortured land, the only route through it was this one, the Coronado Trail. It followed a knife edge of a ridge down to lower elevations then crossed three more mountains before finally hitting the real desert at Morenci.

Stray Horse campground was only a short descent from the rim and in a saddle between two canyons. After a day of climbing, and being over the top with what seemed like all of Arizona spread below me, I was ready to stop for the night. Elk bugled there too but at least one of the calls was artificial.

Just before dark, two hunters walked out of the woods.

They'd seen me earlier in the day and were impressed both with the fact that I'd made it over such a steep mountain, and also that I'd caught up with them. As they said this, they were looking back and forth between my bike and their truck. The way I saw it was that they could see their own strength and their own potential from mine. I was at least as strong as them and for this they made an offering: jerky, pop tarts, and water. They saw me as just that strong and so didn't leave me with any warnings about the route ahead.

This first section was a huge, twisting descent and it did look like the entirety of Arizona was before me. Across the twisted landscape I could see the distinctive form of Mt. Graham. The land ahead fell away on all sides and I flew down into an unpopulated and forested landscape. The Blue River Wilderness was on my left and the land to my right was equally wild. There weren't many places in the continental United States so far from civilization.

At the bottom, I discovered what I'd seen from the top with my own eyes, I wasn't at the bottom. There were more mountains to cross. Over the first one, I met a very old man who was looking through binoculars. He was watching an elk on the next mountain. Pointing at the road ahead he said, "There's another big hill after this one but it's not as bad." The hill he was pointing at turned out to be better, as in worse.

It might have been on that mountain that I met a couple from West Plains, Missouri. Back in the eighties, I planted my first thirty thousand trees in that area and still knew people there. I talked about Twin Bridges, Big Spring, a certain cafe with a blue plate special, and other places which they knew well. The couple were astounded that I knew their home like that and it struck me that they could name anywhere and I'd still be able to play this

game. Testing myself I said, "Name some other place that you know."

"Texas," and I don't remember what town it was but I knew it well and had at least one story about the place.

Gray's Mountain was the last big mountain before Morenci but it wouldn't be my last hill. I was for sure fatigued if not exhausted. Well, exhausted would mean I couldn't go any farther but I could, even fatigued. Persistence was my strength and I had persisted. Over the course of the day I'd dropped from eight thousand and some feet to seven thousand then climbed right back up to eighty-two hundred feet. Then I descended to six thousand feet only to climb back up to seven thousand four hundred. All of this was in beauty, through thickly forested mountains on deserted roads.

My relief after all this exertion was found at a closed campground just down from the last pass. I remember how tickled I was that I'd have the whole place to myself and made my way to a likely site. No sooner had I leaned my bike against a table than I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. I'd been so excited to find the place empty that I'd hardly looked around and there was a huge black bear, the largest one I'd ever seen, only about forty feet away at the dumpster.

The last time I'd seen a bear it made me quiver in fear but that was a grizzly and I faced my fear that day. With this black bear, and it was huge and close, I had no fear, only compassion, and not wanting trouble, spoke to it. In a loud commanding voice I said, "Don't you know bears aren't allowed in campgrounds? You better move along before a ranger finds you."

The bear looked up guiltily as if it understood what I'd said and without any further ado started limping away. Yup,

limping. It might have had a cactus thorn in its paw but it kept going. I listened as it broke through the brush and saw it again after it had crossed the road and climbed atop a boulder on the far embankment. It stopped there and looked back. We could see each other and I pointed at it, saying in my loud voice, "I told you. You better get on out of here." It turned and disappeared into the forest.

All I could think at that point was to wish that I had the courage like the woman I met in Canada who would help a bear. I would have said, "Come here buddy. Let me look at that," and it would have come. I was closer to her way of being than I'd ever been in my life though. It was the first time I'd encountered a bear without experiencing even a tiny bit of fear.

My camp that night proved the versatility of my tarp. I set it up above a picnic table and found myself with a loft, a bench, and a foyer.

Past the closed campground was a fantastically steep descent into red rock country. There was a stone arch and rock fingers of God. This was the supposed route Coronado took in 1540 and I was amazed that anyone back then would have braved the climb. Even on a bicycle with a paved road, I doubt that I would have made it going the other direction. Knowing the lush bear filled oak valley above though, I knew he'd earned his reward.

Below the red rocks were man made mountains, the machinations of the Morenci mining men. I saw it as Mordor, a bottomless pit with orcs relentlessly digging even deeper and wider. The orcs turned out to be nice though.

All of the mine vistas were closed and locked to visitors. Both sides of the road were lined with a barbed wire topped chain link fence behind which was a berm of large crushed rocks. There

were eyes of green in the gravel by the road though and I stopped and picked up a small turquoise or malachite. There were many others but the grade here had turned against me and I rarely stopped during a climb.

There were workers at the top of the hill watching me and when I felt their eyes, I waved. They were watching so closely that they waved back immediately, there was no delay. It was a hard climb and I appreciated the respect.

Then there was a section of construction with a pilot car and the woman at the stop sign didn't even see me coming. One of the other workers saw me though and hollered, "Give him a water." The first woman jumped, embarrassed that I'd been able to sneak up on her. They were building a tunnel but through the air. After they built it, they were going to put a mountain on top of it. I'm not kidding.

The mining went on all the way into Morenci which was like an oasis amid this vast shaped majesty. Seriously, they had devoured beautiful mountains and made the tailings into something else, pits and mounds. The town was reformed too and had a new plaza. It was trendy, not the dirty old mining town it used to be. People there worked out at the gym and recuperated with a fancy frappe at the adjoining coffee franchise.

A child smiled at me outside of a grocery store and I said, "Hi. Do you see the praying mantis?" pointing at one that was on the table before me. She had, and one of the three women with her said it had been on my bike. One of the other women looked almost exactly like a close friend who taught Chi Nei Tsang and so we talked about the inner smile which is at the heart of that teaching. The child was such a great example of this practice in action that I couldn't help but comment on it. The women were

full of love too and we all smiled together.

There was an information center in Clifton at the old train depot. Along with the info, there were a few crafters and gardeners selling their wares. One table had three wooden swords and some other knick knacks but there was nobody at the table. Picking up one of the swords, I could feel the play in it. It wasn't new, it was a toy that through great imagination had crossed the boundary to become real.

Dahlia was the girl with the swords. I found her outside with the gardeners who were her grandparents. She was eighteen and eager to start studying veterinary sciences, large animals of course, which anyone could tell from her boots. Small animal vets wear sneakers.

Dahlia's grandfather was a bicyclist too. He'd recently ridden up Horse Thief Canyon, a steep road that I'd coasted down two years earlier. He was in his seventies. The grandma looked just like my Robertson relatives and just like that, we were all family.

They were also Christians and we talked about grace. I mean, the spiritual side of my journey had already come up and I wanted to give them something. Basically I pointed out that when we are with others we grant them great grace. We don't see someone beset with negative self perceptions although we all carry them. We just love each other. The challenge is to grant that same grace to ourselves.

I had a gift to give too and that was the small turquoise stone I'd found in Morenci. I gave it to Dahlia. As I got ready to ride off the grandmother asked if I had room for a loaf of the hearth bread that she was selling. I accepted this bread of life and rode on.

Three miles past Clifton was the Black Hills Back Country Byway, a twenty mile long washboarded gravel road that went through the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area. I turned and left the pavement reaching the Owl Canyon Campground just ahead of a big storm. The campground was on a bench of desert above the cliff walls of the Gila Canyon set amid mostly chaparral and some scrub mesquite. I stood on the edge of the cliff admiring the clear flow of the Gila River below me but had to make it quick, the storm was almost there.

The storm when it arrived blew in hard and the clouds had tails like what is seen in tornado development. I had my tarp up already under a campsite picnic shelter and the force of the wind tore one of the corner ties right from the tarp. I weighted it down with a boulder and huddled inside.

The wind kept up strong for most of an hour but then it just rained and it rained for hours. I tightened up my shelter and started collecting the rainwater. When all my jugs were full, I made supper, laid out my bed, and called it a night.

In the morning, the box canyon of the Gila River was full of runoff from cliff to cliff. The night before it'd been a clear and inviting stream that I'd planned to bathe in. Now it was full of raging muddy water. It subsided some before I left but not by much and fortunately, the top of the flood was still below the bridge.

Across the bridge was yet another huge climb. I was at 3,400 feet and the pass was at 5,300, almost two thousand feet in six miles on a graveled rock road. It wasn't easy going but was rideable, except for the gentlest grades which were still soft from the rain. The only traffic was one ATV which didn't stop.

About halfway to the top was a big covered stock tank and

a smaller open tank from which I took a nice shower and washed my hair. There was a generator running a pump and a power outlet on it. I charged my device while I bathed then wrote a song while I was drying off.

The road has its woes
Its pain and its misery
There's dust in my pores
And dirt in my saddle sores

Riding along
Singing any old country song
Mile after mile
And smile after country smile

So won't you:
Dunk me in a stock tank
It's a backcountry bathtub
Dunk me in a stock tank
I'll be clean as I wanna be
Dunk me in a stock tank
Wash away that pain and misery
Dunk me in a stock tank
Then get dirty with me

The rest of the climb was also steep but I was fresh from my bath and took it strong. I rode past a deep valley filled with big trees and past another stock tank. When I finally reached the saddle that had stood before me, the road climbed up the other side of the mountain from there. It finally dropped off but only to round the top of another canyon and rise even higher. It did that twice more before the final pass.

The descent was a whole different challenge. It was steep and rough and I had to ride the brakes, watching the road closely so as not to wipe out on loose rocks or hit a bump too hard. With that, the descent was nearly as slow as the climb. It reminded me of coming down the backside of Redington Pass two years earlier.

Over this pass, Mt. Graham came fully into view. This particular mountain range, the Pinalenos, has been a significant part of my life since the early 1980s. It was a meaningful view and along the way, the BLM had informational stops, as if this dusty desert road was some kind of tourist attraction, but from those spots I could look over the desert and sense the place. It was a part of me and affected my heart. Did my heart live there? I didn't know the answer to that but I knew what reverence felt like and rode on in this manner.

There was a rockhound area on a side road a few miles before the route rejoined the highway but I quickly realized that the desert around me was also rich with gems: agates and perhaps opals. I stopped and collected a few of the nicer small specimens which I would trade for beer later.

When I reached US 191 I was back on the route I rode two years earlier but it was all new to me now. The road was the same but my awareness had changed. I remembered from then where I'd camped in Safford and it was reassuring to know I had a place to go.

The day wasn't over yet though and now I was in the desert, descended from the mountains and surrounded by dry land. I stopped at the road to Hot Wells where there was some sparse shade, not knowing that in a bit more than a year, I would ride that road. Then there was a historical marker commemorating the passage of General Kearney's Army of the

West. He went through there in 1848 to conquer California and make it safe for exploitation and genocide.

Safford had good water drawn from Bonita Creek in the Gila Riparian Reserve and there was a park in town where I could fill my jugs. Not much had changed about the place; the same homeless people were still there including a young native woman who I particularly remembered. No one recognized me though.

There was WiFi at a fast food restaurant but it was without outlets which is fairly typical where there's a large homeless population so I didn't spend long. There were outlets at the place I'd camped two years earlier and I figured that I would charge there.

It was after dark by then but I still had to buy groceries and stopped at a store for lunch meat and cheese. I hadn't eaten much all day and was getting hungry. As I pulled in the lot, a woman opened her car door almost in front of me but not really that close. She apologized profusely though and we became friends. All she bought in the store was beer and it came in a case that said, "Three Extra!" so I asked for one of the extras, offering her one of the gems which I'd found earlier.

The warm beer rode with me unopened but when I got to the place I knew of, there were people there and I couldn't make camp. There was a nearby alternative though. Across the highway was a trail which followed an irrigation canal and I rode back along that to a nice clean spot where I would watch the stars, wolf down a sandwich, lay out my bed, and drink the warm beer.

My sleeping bag was wet when I woke up. About an hour before sunrise the dew settled and soaked it. I made coffee, packed things up wet, and rode three miles farther out from town to greet the sun from the pool at Roper Hot Springs. I remember watching

the sunrise light up the mountain but from the top down. There was the light, at the top of the mountain, and from there it would brighten the whole world. I had to wonder if I could be like the sun too and from right then knew I would make the ascent myself.

On my way back into town I stopped at the River of Life church. When I went past there the night before, I'd heard a man preaching via an external speaker. He'd said that we can't presume to know the will of God and I agreed with that. I wanted to hear more and sure enough, the pastor was there along with another man. A third man arrived while we were talking.

When I started my journey I thought it was about this or that but eventually learned that I had to get out of my own way. When I did, I found purpose and meaning. This was the practice of what they only thought about in theory. I surrendered to the will of God and with this testimony, the preacher made me coffee, and when nobody was looking, the third man gave me a twenty dollar bill.

Downtown Safford had three or four blocks closed off where people were setting up for the annual salsa festival. Some men were outside of a barber shop and I stopped to ask them where the local bike shop was. They were lined up to have their hair cut and looking in I could see why. The barber, a young man, was obviously an artist.

The two men I was talking with were fascinated by my travels, in particular that I'd come back to Safford. Here I was, once again and I told them how surprised I was to see the same homeless people on the streets as I'd seen two years earlier. They couldn't see them though and just then a short man with a daypack walked around the corner and sat down on the sidewalk leaning against a building. Across the intersection, an older

woman walked by carrying all of her things. The men saw them every day but were blind to them, real people with no substance, and the men were astounded that I could help them see. I could see what a great haircut they were going to get too and built them up over it before I rode on.

There was a man at the park with a large backpack and a huge Casio keyboard. Joe said that his girlfriend had just kicked him out because he liked to smoke weed and she didn't. He was a musician into heavy metal and I asked him if he wanted to hear the new song I'd written. He loved it and it made him smile. More than that, his heart opened. He rolled a joint then, and as soon as he lit it, his girlfriend and her five year old daughter arrived. The little girl wasn't his child but had his eyes and looked just like him. The man made me sing my song again for them and as I did, the mother smoked too. He'd told me that she didn't like pot. The long and the short of this is that she took him back. We could blame this on the heart activation.

My next stop was at the BLM/FS office. I had questions about my route and the BLM worker was very helpful. She showed me every map and although she hadn't been to where I was going, she had great second hand information. She wanted to know how I did it too so I told her, "God is with me."

The woman smiled and looking into my eyes knew it was true. She tried to picture herself doing what I did and said, "I would be scared."

As always, I was astounded that her version of religiosity didn't include a certain confidence that her deity was a protector. I'd been held in safety through eight countries by then and had no qualms about giving credit where it was due. I praised, (allowed for awareness of the beauty in creation), and all the promises

were made true. My reply was from Psalm 23 and I said, “He promised, ‘Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil,’ and He keeps his word.”

I still didn't understand how people could believe and not trust. In many ways I thought my job might simply be to validate their beliefs. That's how this woman took me and taken by my certainty, she paid me in my favorite currency, kinship. This was a deep witnessing.

By then I'd decided to wait until Monday to check on my mail. My friend said that the earliest it would arrive would be that day and usually there's a sorting process so it takes until the next day before it would be available at the counter. In the meantime, I had a mountain to climb. I picked up more groceries only later regretting having too many supplies. As usual, I was hauling a heavy load.

State Highway 366 led up the mountain and I could see where the road met the treeline many miles above me. It was obviously a brutal climb, a straight shot up a steep slope with no shade. Except for the shadow of a national forest welcome sign many miles up this hill, and then later the shade of a cut bank along a side road, there would be no relief and by midafternoon it would be almost a hundred degrees out. I rose through creosote bush and shrub mesquite, through larger mesquite, and then to the first juniper trees, persisting despite every obstacle and singing as I went.

Past the edge of the forest, there was one short section of the road that was simply too steep to ride, otherwise it was all just hard. I stuck it out though, bare except for shorts, sandals, and a hat, reaching the Noon Creek picnic area at about five. It was posted as day use only but I knew I'd stay there. I had to lighten

my load by a pound of bacon and two fat potatoes before I'd be able to ride on. In addition there was water in Noon Creek so I had everything I needed, including grapes which a woman from Pueblo, Colorado offered me as I walked by scouting for a place to sleep.

Next to an oak-fueled fire and full from a big pan of fried potatoes, I snuggled down in my bags. This sleep was so perfect - until three-thirty in the morning when the skunks woke me up. Now I have had lots of animals come up to me at night and I usually just talk to them. I probably said, "There are people here. Move along but come back for scraps tomorrow." This only worked as long as I had my light on them and as soon as I tried to go back to sleep, they would return. After about an hour of spotlighting them like this, I got up and built up the fire. That solved the problem and I went back to bed.

There was a certain recreational aspect to this climb but there was more to it than that. I'd just biked halfway across a continent and here was Mt. Graham, a sky island and a personal place of pilgrimage. It was also somewhere I could go to be, and not just be passing through. Also, as I'd seen from the hot springs, it was a place to greet the first light of day.

Not knowing there was a greater purpose (perhaps), I nurtured a certain perspective. Basically I cleared my mind by reminding myself that I was on a dead end road, that I could turn around at any point, and that I was simply passing time while waiting for mail to arrive. There was no attachment to accomplishing anything. It was simply somewhere hard to go. And I sang.

In later years, I'd discover that I loved Safford for all the many hard places to go. Just getting to this picnic area I'd climbed

2,500 feet and that's what I needed, to go past what I thought I was capable of. I as always needed to climb another mountain and there were still 3,500 more feet to go. I also needed the good water from Noon Creek and the beauty that was right there, that was enough all by itself but I packed up and kept going. More hard things were the order of the day and perhaps there would be an even greater serenity at the top.

Past Noon Creek I rode up and across the mountain through relatively bare land until Wet Canyon and from there I was solidly in the forest. This is where the first switchbacks start and they led to a broad flat that was forested in tall ponderosa pines, Turkey Flat. The national forest started again just past a village of summer homes. That was my last rest before the top. There were six more switchbacks with hairpin turns and each was dramatically higher than the last. I rode steady, only stopping twice as I gained almost four thousand more feet. It astounded me that the thick forest that I'd only seen above me was right there and that I was above what had seemed an impossible climb away. I was strong like that all day and some of this had to do with the quality of the atmosphere. The air was fresher and the temperature a lot cooler.

At the top of the last switchback, and at the first of several overlooks, I met Greg, a transplant from White Bear Lake, Minnesota. He was there when I stopped, taking a break from exploring Arizona. He loved the state as much as I did and we spent an hour becoming friends. This was very nice and welcome but I really just wanted to sit there by myself. The view would have been quite enough company and I could see all the land which I'd ridden two years earlier, in particular picking out Dos Cabezas, the Willcox Playa, and the Dragoon Mountains.

The climb alone, much less the view from the top, was well worth the effort. I'd biked from three thousand feet up to nine thousand. Down in the desert, it was a hundred degrees. Up here, the temperature was only fifty-eight.

The first campground was a fee area, crowded, and cold. I rode on. I finally stopped at the Upper Hospital Flats undeveloped camping area. There was a family at the top of the site with a blazing fire who said that they were just picnicking and that I could have their fire when they left. It was a beautiful location amid old growth trees and near a stream that came out of the ground right there. I set up my camp and waited for the fire.

There were five ancient trees in the grove, each with a circumference of thirty feet. The moon was waxing and the forest bright. I felt truly reverential. I wanted to share in the significance of the grove, to be with the trees and I wrote:

Grove of ancient trees
High atop desert mountain
Listen your story

Then I thought about the climb. Why would I do it? I was at best going three miles an hour for twenty miles. The only relief was on the final switchback where the grade was only about five percent for maybe half a mile. It was hard but I was strong, capable, and persistent. I thought as I rode, "When it's hard, keep going. See what happens," and my thoughts were in exactly those words. I didn't feel like I was doing anything special either. I just knew it was hard. Nor was I anticipating the top. I wanted to see off the other side of course but I just rode. It was all satori, peace in being. I was riding. It was hard and I did it.

When I was finally alone with the trees, warm and fed on fat quesadillas that I made on the gifted fire, I felt the grove like I wrote above and the struggle to get there. My next thought took me by surprise though. It was a prayer for Albuquerque. When I was stuck above the city, frustrated with my tires, I transformed my angst by imagining every heart in the city, visualizing them all waking up the next day in heart consciousness. It was a true prayer and here on Mt. Graham, I found myself still placed there. It surprised me to find this connection still alive a thousand miles away in this grove of ancient trees.

The night was cold and I sat up long by the fire, my only company yet another skunk who brazenly and casually, as if it was his right, joined me at the fire to dine on marshmallow drips left by the children who'd blessed my fire with such joy. It didn't stay long. I'd spotlighted it and it didn't want to perform. It just wanted a treat and picked up a scrap, ate it with relish, then left at its own pace.

My pace was slow the next morning. I was with the ancient arboreal healers at Hospital Flats and they said to rest and to live so I cushioned a seat by the fire and carved a stone. To live I'd make something out of nothing. To rest... It was cold there and hard to rest. I was shaded by the giants; the thick old growth protected the glade from all but a few hours of sunlight. It was what the doctors ordered though and I endured the treatment as long as I could. Finally I packed up and rode on after first filling my prescription for a healthy harvest of fresh nettles. I would eat them with my supper that night.

Southeast Arizona lay below me. Across the Galiuros and Mt. Lemmon, I could see most of the way across the state to Baboquivari Peak. Directly below me was Ft. Grant, Bonita, and

the Aravaipa River. South in the basin, Wilcox and the huge dry lake south of there were visible. West of the playa stood the Dragoons, then the Santa Rita Mountains above Patagonia, and beyond them Mexico. East of the playa stood the Dos Cabezas and the Chiricahuas. From this perspective, my route was clear.

The hairpin curve that rounds the mountain at the very southeast end of the top was a natural place to stop again. I would take the long way around getting there but below me was my route and from here I could contemplate riding it. This was the same place where I met Greg the day before and this time a couple from Montana pulled in. They were old. Not as old as the trees but almost. They'd been real hippies in the hippy days fifty years earlier. We became friends when I commented on the orchestra of birds in the big tree behind them.

The man said, "Crested nuthatches," and they both got out their birding binoculars to watch them. I just wanted to be with the mountain but they stayed with me for most of an hour until I finally left. The spot was so meditative that I remember feeling like I had with Greg, that I wished I was there alone. The company, both times, was truly a blessing though.

After riding back down the six switchbacks I turned in at Twilight Campground. I mostly just needed a warmer spot and was only descending for that. This place was at about eight thousand feet and got good morning sun. It was likely called Twilight though because the mountain occluded the sun very early in the evening.

A local couple pulled in as I finished setting up my camp. There were only two picnic tables, both together, and I was sitting at one of them. They parked down a little ways and the man got out of the car with picnic stuff so I invited them to the table. He

set a plate for him and his wife and they sat down but almost immediately were beset by bees. I'd given the bees an apple core and with this offering they left me alone. The couple didn't know how to talk to bees though and they quickly retreated to their car to eat. He said, "Brother," as they left.

When the couple was done eating, they got out of their car and walked hand in hand back towards me. They wanted to know why I started bicycling everywhere and I told them that my journey was about the heart. Mine opened working at a homeless shelter and was currently very warm because he'd said my favorite word, brother. At this explanation, we all became friends. They were seekers and my experiences validated their explorations. They paid me for my insight as people so often do. The offering was simply a couple of triple-a batteries for my lights and a twenty dollar bill. Thanks Doug and Terry! Two years later I would meet them far out in the desert at Hot Wells and then on another remote backroad high above Safford.

Cullen Dairy was my next stop. It was a primitive camping area at seven thousand feet and across the highway was a small road which led along the side of the mountain to an old apple orchard. The apples were ripe and crisp too, heirloom organic apples if you will. I picked a few each from three different trees.

There were rock pools in Noon Creek visible from the highway at the Round the Mountain trailhead. I decided to follow the trail and try to reach them. About fifty feet down the trail, I found a nice little cluster of quartz crystals. This was a gift from the mountain and I accepted it as I had the healing, the nettles, and the apples.

The trail led towards the creek but it turned the wrong way so I bushwhacked through the yucca and manzanita until I

came upon an overgrown trail that did go to the pools. It was like a miniature Sabino Canyon there, the pools too small to swim in but plenty deep to dunk and soak. I stripped down and bathed. Refreshed, the walk back took awhile. It was my policy not to collect rocks but there was quartz everywhere and looking for crystals had almost always been a part of my life. I didn't find any more though.

By then I was nearly off the mountain with only eight miles of straight downhill to go. I'd been looking forward to this because I would be able to really let go where for most of the descent I'd had to ride the brakes. So I started flying along and my rear tire went flat. This was by the forest boundary welcome sign and I walked the bike there to fix the tube in that shade.

There were ten thorns in the tire but none of them made it past the puncture resistant layer. The hole was on the rim side of the tube and likely caused from debris that had gotten in there when I changed the tire in the sand. I fixed the tube which got me the rest of the way down the mountain and then a few miles down the highway where it went flat again.

My mail had arrived by then so I picked it up, went to get groceries in preparation for leaving town, and the tire went flat yet again. I walked it to the bike shop and bought two new tubes for two dollars each. I fixed it right there and found an even bigger problem, my rim was cracked. One of the spokes was pulling through. This was a catastrophic discovery. I had no money to replace it and I definitely could not take it like that out into the desert then over a mountain range on a gravel road. I could only hope that I'd find a machinist with the right scrap of metal that could be affixed to the inside of the rim with the spoke going through that.

Since I couldn't leave Safford yet, I went back to the River of Life church and arrived just in time for a potluck supper and then a group discussion about forgiveness. Part of the closing of the discussion was a request for anyone needing prayer and Lisa spoke up. She had an issue which was tormenting her even right then. Four or five of the congregation gathered around her placing one hand each upon her. They extended their other palms to the heavens falling into what looked like a trance (I've called this technique "surrender"). Then they prayed. In my heartsight, the exchange of energy was visible. They channeled all the light of the universe and it settled on the woman, almost as if to say, "Here you are restored." I saw this pretty much as I've written it above. Astounded, I prayed too.

Spending a full moon night with the dead at the town cemetery was my next approach to the boundaries. I loved cemeteries and this wasn't an irrigated one either. Every plot was like a little zen garden with raked pebbles and discrete statuary. There was electricity and water near some benches but it was also a cemetery that never sleeps; there were people in and out all night. I eventually got a few hours rest in a tucked away spot out of sight of all the trucks that came by close.

From the cemetery, I followed the bike trails to the Safford Discovery Center, a cienega on the first mesa above the Gila Valley. It was the perfect place to make another pot of coffee and contemplate the morning. The trail went off towards the mountain and I went down towards town where I found the new Safford, this more recent development peopled by souls who stare but say fuck you instead of good morning. I hadn't gotten much sleep and I'd passed the night with the dead. Perhaps that's why everything was so surreal.

The Safford I knew, the historic farming community, was gone, replaced by suburban development. If dropped there, I would have thought I was in Tucson. The amenities were urban too. There was a supermarket with a trendy coffee franchise, a building supply department store, and a cloned burger joint across the highway. This development was anchored by a large supercenter of one brand or another and I stopped there for donuts.

It was hard to go into the store though. In praise for the sunrise, the mountain awoke and in the language of light it spoke of its treasures. It was glorified and knew it. It said, "Look at me and find serenity." I had just been up there so I knew the truth of this. It was better than donuts. Artistically, the light was incredibly well balanced between the foreground palms at the edge of the parking lot, the high mountain valleys which were glowing in the light of the rising sun, and the clouds low on the mountain which reflected the light back to the slopes.

After that, I leashed my momentum and aimed for the library. I mean, I was on the edge of town and wanted to ride on, I was itching to go, but the desert is no joke. I could not ride off on a cracked rim. On the way to the library though, I met another touring cyclist. His bike was in the back of a truck and the wheel was off, resting against the wall of a convenience store. I didn't know what to think. That I wasn't the only bicyclist in town with wheel issues was some coincidence.

The rider was easy to pick out because he was wearing bike shorts and had the gear. The road was in his eyes too and us cyclists can usually pick each other out so we introduced ourselves at first sight. I half-jokingly asked if he had an extra wheel and this was a rabbit brain kind of question because of

course he didn't, he was a broken down cyclist like me. He was on his way to the bike shop and we agreed to meet there later.

Touching base with my friends using the WiFi at the library was bittersweet. I wanted to announce that I was finally back on the road and here I was stranded. I mean, my friends did want to know when I was struggling so I posted about my cracked rim and privately asked a couple people if they could help.

The other cyclist was at the bike shop when I got there. He was an air force pilot riding across the country in stages and had previously ridden from San Diego to Phoenix. He'd just picked up from where he left off and broke down on his second day. Meanwhile, I tried to order a wheel but the owner could not make another order just then. Double checking his stock though, he did find a wheel my size and I asked him to hold it for me.

When the other rider's wheel was done, his brake still rubbed and he said to the shop owner, "Fix it. I'll pay you for a full tune-up even." That made him sound flush enough to pay for my wheel too. The man did know where I was coming from when I asked but said no. I wasn't worried, my friends would help, and I assured him of this. We talked more and were ourselves becoming friends.

Back at the library, I met Digger and his big loveable dog. He was my age but looked ten years older and lived in a tent down on the Gila. I was about to make sandwiches and offered him one. As we ate he told me about his life. He had one friend who came to his camp in the evenings. He didn't like the man but the guy always brought beer which earned him toleration. He did accept my brotherhood but we didn't really bond either.

A short while after Digger left, Lois walked up. She also lived outside but was younger, probably in her thirties. She told

me about the different places she slept. All safe places. Then she showed me her stones that she'd collected around there. She had thirty or forty Apache tears, a dozen or so old buttons, and a bunch of peridot. Some of the stones were polished which she did herself with a dremel. I gave her some heart buttons that I'd been carrying since Florida, those and a small quartz crystal.

For some reason I needed to make a phone call and went back to the River of Life church for that, arriving just in time for a Bible study about the rapture. Well, it was more about how they'd someday realize the eternal life part of their salvation and I had to bite my tongue. As I understood their religion, accepting the savior was a rebirth into eternal life, a right then and there kind of thing, and if I'd spoken it would have been to say that it might be more useful to realize salvation now. I wasn't there as a preacher or prophet or anything though, simply to use the phone.

The night before the group leader had asked if anyone needed prayer and Lisa had. She was suffering from kidney stones so they had all prayed on her. Noticing that the healing was real, I added my prayer too. Anyway, after I used their phone, Lisa came outside with me, she was cold and needed the sun. She was so cold that she had me feel her and even in the hot sunshine, she was like a cool spring.

Asking her about the prayer, she said that when she got home, she felt and heard a pop. It surprised her and she didn't believe it was from the prayer nor did she believe it was her healing. So, she had to test it, and showed me how she'd bent into the position which previously caused her so much pain. Wide eyed, she looked at me and said, "The pain was gone." Healing. I asked her for more of her coolness then, offering a hug, and we parted with that warmth.

My camp that night was on the Gila but far past where Digger said he was camped. I built a fire, fried potatoes with carrot and green pepper, and slept in my tent. I rarely set the tent up but was a little worried about snakes there.

In the morning, an old man at the grocery store asked me about my plans. I was going to ride out the Klondyke Road and circle the mountain to Bonita. He lit up when I mentioned Klondyke Road and told me that he harvested acorns out there, just over the pass. I asked him how he leached the tannin and prepared them. He replied, "Oh no. They're sweet. I eat them straight from the tree."

A man coming out of the store approached me with money in his hand, three dollars. I tried to refuse but at his look said, "It would be helpful." I wasn't looking for a handout but was simply eating yogurt and donuts. I spent the money on lunch later.

When I got back to the library and checked WiFi, I was surprised to see a fifty-five dollar donation in my account. It was from the bicyclist I'd met the previous day and came with an apology for not buying the wheel for me the day before.

The owner of the bike shop was very kind. He gave me another set of new tubes and we chatted while he waited for his apprentice to get there. He didn't want to true the new wheel himself. He'd been at it for 37 years and turned enough wrenches for a lifetime.

With the new wheel mounted, I was ready to roll but didn't make it very far before meeting Angela. She was on her way to the school where she sat in with her fourteen year old son. The boy had previously been arrested at the school for being restless and belligerent and Angela went every day to make sure this didn't happen again.

We smiled at each other at first sight. She had a large daypack with a skateboard poking out of it. It might have been the wheels but we saw ourselves in each other, stopping to make friends right there in the blazing sun. It was doubly hot too because we were on bare pavement. I mean, all this was instant. We met in the traffic lane of a gas station oblivious to any other world but the one we were sharing with each other.

We moved finally but not very far and were still on the concrete in the sun, smiling and talking. We shared the meaning of our names. I mean, was I talking with Angela or with an angel? I was Peaceful Valley Walker and I invited her to consider who she might be.

Angela told me about her move from Chicago and the trouble she'd had since then. Arizona had been no picnic but she clearly had the strength to deal with her challenges. We could have talked for hours but she had as firm of an intent as I did, her to the school and me to the road. We lent each other confidence though and I could see that everything would work out for her.

We parted with hugs and the strangest thing was how cool she was for us being in the full sun at ninety-five degrees. It was the coolness of shade next to a spring and it was like with Lisa the day before. There was a certain spirit too. Her name was Angela but in my mind both her and Lisa were angels, as fresh a cool breeze.

6 The Corner to Paradise

Finding angels, great kindness, hot springs, and the sacred trees on top of the mountain, I was filled with peace, reverence, and serenity. I felt my strength too. Two months earlier, I'd thought my destination was the state of Arizona, not this state of awareness. It was only fitting though, I'd traveled in prayer. With my mail in hand, my bike repaired, and this certain peace, I was ready for anything and rode on into the unknown.

Thatcher was the first town and by the time I reached it, it was too hot out to ride so I went to the park for a siesta. As I pulled in, I spotted three young people working on a project. I'd seen them the day before in Safford equally intent on whatever they had going but there hadn't been an opportunity then to ask them about it. It turned out that they were making a film about loneliness and here I was alone. Not that they wanted to include me in their film, they didn't even have a cinematographic perspective yet, and were simply collecting scenes which they might use once they did. I wished that they did have a story though and tried to help them find one.

In the shade of one of the picnic shelters at the park were two Apache, a couple my age, and after the students left they beckoned me over. Noticing that my skin was almost as dark as his, the man asked if I was native so I told him about my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Moose who was from the Blackfeet nation. The man had a name for my people, Chukchi. He had the latitude right but the Chukchi live in Russia. He also gave me the word for water in his language, t'u.

The couple were homeless, at least when they were off the reservation. They were doing well though and told me about where they camped saying that Thatcher had been very kind to them. They had extra even and offered me a burger from a bagful that someone had just given them.

Thatcher was actually one of the places where I first experienced hunger, way back in the early eighties. Back then I'd camped at the now capped hot well next to the Gila and eaten rattlesnake. It's part of why the desert was in my blood. The man and I shared brotherhood over this memory, he'd experienced hunger too, even the day before. We talked about what eating together from a blessed gift said about us now. Meanwhile his partner thought we were so well met that she said a prayer to honor the creator. They were both goofily drunk and it was an irreverently holy moment.

The ten miles to Pima were in full sun at a hundred degrees. I stopped at a store, got a cold drink, and went to the city park. It was quiet, shady, and peaceful. Then school got out and about six or eight fourteen year olds came up noisily. I mean, I heard them coming, all girls. Two of them were more curious than the rest and edged closer to where I was sitting. I was dying to talk with anyone and broke the ice asking them about their day. One of

them, Justine, wanted to know everything about what I was doing and really listened. Both of the girls let me read from what I was working on, an excerpt about the light on the mountain. This led into a quite deep discussion about intent and purpose. I proposed that if they discovered intent at their age that they could go far.

Justine's father got there then and we began to talk too. It was turning into a good conversation; his curiosity was as brilliant as his daughter's. However, there were two men with him who had held back as soon as they saw me. The father and I were really becoming friends though and as the light of our brotherhood grew brighter, his friends called him off. It was strangely uncomfortable and I left. It was late in the afternoon by then and I was ready to go anyway. Although it was still hot out, there was the promise of evening for me to ride into.

Klondyke Road was ten miles up the highway from Pima and from there I would be on gravel roads for fifty miles. From the corner, I made seven miles before dark and ten after, riding by dim headlight. It was a challenge but I wanted to cover as much ground as I could while it was cool out. The moon rose as I rode and I imagined that I was racing it to the saddle. Its light caught up with me, passed, and was steadily climbing to the pass. The moonlight won. I killed my lights and rode on in its luminosity.

In that light I remembered another moonlit night. It was 1985 and five of us were on our way to the Peyote Way Church from Oracle Junction. Along the way there was a section of gravel where tall rocks, thirty foot tall monoliths, stood beside the road. We took a break there and even now I feel placed thinking about it. It was the peyote before the peyote in a manner of speaking and the tangible sense of being there puts the lie to time and space. The memory is that present even now. There were only so

many ways to the Aravaipi from Oracle too and in 2018, this was it but there was no such feature on that road as if it didn't exist anymore.

The saddle was wide and I stopped as soon as I was on it. There was a big circle of a clearing, bare earth which I preferred when setting camp in the dark. I wanted to know where the tarantula dens were and what tracks were present before camping near brush so this spot was perfect. I gathered wood, placed a few rocks in a small circle, and built a fire. I was in the open in the moonlight under the stars and as at home as I would ever be. In this great peace I fell to sleep.

There was a murder in the morning and to the thirty or forty crows who flew in to see my still body lying in the clearing, I must have looked like the victim. If I had been, it would have been an easy breakfast for them. The birds scattered as soon as I moved but I would see them again soon. I made coffee, packed up, and rode on.

The crows were just a mile or so up the road and I thanked them for being the beauty which woke me up that morning. It struck me that they were existent in beauty as was I but they were much better at practicing it. I honored them with a song about this. The words came to me, or came through me, and I would sing them all morning even as I flew along. (I wish that I remembered this song).

The moon was still in the sky too. Moonlight had won the race to the saddle the night before but this was a wide pass and the moon itself was still ten degrees above the far side. It was only a mile or two for me to the final rise and I would be below it before the moon. What meaning is there in life but to race the moon?

The descent started at the very top of a canyon and I coasted down into the oak trees where the old man from Safford had told me he gathered acorns. I still expected to come upon the rocks from my memories but they weren't on this stretch either. The oaks went on for several miles until the road left the canyon to follow the ridge of a mesa past other fantastic rock formations all the way down to the Aravaipa drainage. The Galiuro Mountains stood so close before me that I could imagine being on High Creek again. Although I'd been young, stoned, and in the back of a hippy van the first time I went to the Peyote Way Church of God; and piloting a hippie bus when I went up into the Galiuros, I still remembered the routes and turned left.

Back then, almost forty years earlier, I'd arrived clueless. I'd tried the peyote derivative mescaline before, as early as 1978 during a Fleetwood Mac concert, and also read *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley but none of that prepared me for eating fourteen peyote buttons around a fire then traveling the universe with Swami who read us the entire Bhagavad Gita from what was written in the stars. I later wondered if all I learned that night was more than I could even describe to myself. It was life in the real world, not trippiness like on other psychedelics.

Here in 2018, the snake tracks were thick on the lane into the compound. It was the first thing I noticed aside from the large welcoming sign at the road. Although I didn't see anything but tracks, the land is well known for rattlesnakes but they hardly bother the walkers. They probably still knew me from my own walk there.

The deacons at the church understood that I was on a pilgrimage and that I wasn't there for peyote. I truly wasn't seeking anything, nothing aside from old memories, and actually

had a gift, the crystal that I'd found on the mountain above.

We talked about the peyote experience and the guidance that they offer people who walk that path. They prepare the peyote into a drink and visitors consume it right there in the building. When I was there before, I was with rainbow family and we had our own traditions, eating the cacti whole, tufts and all, and this around a campfire in the desert with the snakes. That was our tradition as far as we knew. Whichever method, the cactus helps people connect with the real world and at this time, in 2018, I was in the real world already. This real world came with a deliciously simple lunch and we all ate together.

As I finished the meal and out of the corner of my eye I saw a presence. It was a glimpse that only lasted for a second and it was of a dear friend. I could feel her sitting there from when she had visited three years earlier. The perception was striking. I noted it, then dismissed it. It was a long struggle to overcome the attachment that I held for her and I had no desire to grasp it again. The love was real though and seeing her in this sight was healing; it might even have been why I was there. Note that one could take peyote to gain this type of perception. I was in the real world already though and apparently could see across time.

The long climb out of the Aravaipa from there was not timeless, not yet but it would be. It was hot and a challenge and a test. Shirtless, the heat was bearable until it got even hotter. The sun beat down so intensely that my skin would have blistered so I put my shirt back on. After ten miles or so there was finally a stock tank full of clean cool water. Long, single-stemmed plants grew from the bottom of the tank to within about a foot of the water's surface. I climbed up a pallet that was leaning against it like a ladder and jumped in, clothes and all. The plants tickled my

legs as I swam around.

Riding on wet was no solution to the heat. The evaporative cooling of a wet t-shirt tied over my shoulders was usually all the air conditioning I needed but today the sun was simply too intense. As seasoned as I already was, the only solution was to strip out of my wet t-shirt, put on long sleeves, and ride on.

This intense heat along with the deserted gravel road and the towering mountains surrounding it all put me into a reverie. It felt like being in a place that wasn't a place and in a time outside of time. The miles weren't long or short nor was the heat bearable or unbearable. It was a translation of location almost like teleportation. Still I struggled, pedaling on and sweating.

There was shade next to a wall in the ghost town of Bonita. Adjacent to this property was the only building, an old closed store which was set back behind a chain link fence. In the large parking area in front of the place, about seventy-five uniformed officers were conducting an exercise. We watched each other. While they finished up their games, I smoked, made sandwiches, and eventually they all left. Then I found my peace. Mt. Graham was once again before me but this time from the other side.

The ride from Bonita to Willcox was through a rich agricultural land filled with apple and pear orchards, fields of pumpkins, a big tomato and pot greenhouse operation, and of course corn, cotton, and alfalfa. The sun set before I reached the town. Conveniently, there was a store right there and it'd been a long hard day. This was the first store I'd seen in two full days. I bought a beer and a bag of chips and rode on to the first suitable driveway where I would be able to rest and unwind. A beer lent just the right kind of fortitude for times like this and I needed it.

There were eight more miles to ride in the night and I would still have to find a place to camp.

Traffic, of which there wasn't much, was more than considerate and every car gave me a full lane. I was grateful for my friend Matthew in the Nantahala who had given me bright lights when I passed through North Carolina in the Spring. This gift gave me the confidence to ride strong.

To my great pleasure, there was a bike trail on the edge of Willcox with benches, water fountains, and an adjoining lonely park. After a few hours in town using WiFi, I rode back to it and strung my hammock in the limbs of a spreading mesquite.

Chris was along my route as I crossed Willcox the next morning. He was the second person I'd met on the route whose parent was a long time rainbow hippie and he saw his dad in me, Randy Webb. I knew Randy from the old days but not very well and he had died in a trainyard accident in Louisiana about eight years earlier. Although his father told him all about gatherings, Chris had never been to one and meeting travelers like me was the closest he ever came to it.

Chris invited me to his house for a shower but we couldn't actually go there because his housemate, maybe a sister, was going to Tucson to kidnap her mom from a nursing home. If she found Chris, he would have had to go along or at the very least have a scene because he absolutely did not want to go. It's why he was out so early in the first place so we went to the park instead. I laughed and thanked him for being a real person when he told me his nickname, Dickhead. He'd been in prison six times and earned the name there. At my acceptance of him as he was, we were brothers.

The thirty-six miles from Wilcox to Chiricahua National

Monument were in the full sun with almost no shade. The road led through thick grasslands which were astoundingly beautiful. There were no trees except for a good mesquite in the town of Dos Cabezas, a few trees on the wrong side of a no trespassing sign at the corner to Fort Bowie (which I rested in the shade of anyway), and the Riggs cemetery which was in the foothills of the Chiricahuas. The Riggs were among the first colonizers in the area and the trees towering over their tombs had been growing since they settled there. It was hot out, in the upper nineties, and this shade was good.

Diego was from Sinaloa and had walked four days on the mountain to get past border checkpoints. I met him when I was almost to the national monument. The spot where we met wasn't an overlook but it overlooked everything. The entire west side of the Chiricahuas stood before us and the Sonora lay below. From where we stood, the world around us was a high quality topographic map and we could simply point to share our routes. We barely shared a language but this made it easy to communicate.

The man was happy to see me but overall was scared. "La migre," he said.

It astounded me that he was out in the open on the highway but I understood his fear. We were north of the checkpoints though and he'd made it this far. There were farms in Willcox and he was almost there. "Treinta mas millas," I said, and luckily I could remember that much but my tongue was tied otherwise. I couldn't think how to say anything in Spanish.

Sharing water and other necessities with him helped but the man was still struggling and I wanted to calm him. With this purpose, the words were all of a sudden in me and I said, "Tu no

viaje solo. Viaje con Dios.” I remember thinking that he wouldn’t have made it this far if he were walking alone. He believed me in this too and I could see into him as he began to cry. There was all the love of his family shining on him and I could see how much he loved them in return. He kept crying and returned most of the water that I’d just given him. It was a baptism of brotherhood. The tears continued to fall and I said that he had to walk with God for his mother, for his family, and for his future. In my stilted Spanish, I said that in my heart I would pray for him, “Yo oren en mi corazon para tu.” He cried more. These were strong tears from a good and brave man.

Chiricahua National Monument nourished me as surely as had the gratitude of the young immigrant. Within a couple miles of the entrance was an oak-shaded picnic area with running water and I again found my peace. It was a stillness so quiet that the Coues deer grazed unafraid. For me, these tiny deer turned it into a fairy grove, a place just a bit skewed from normal reality. This fantasy was quite enough to recharge me and wanting to get started on the gravel road to the pass before the day ended, I rode back out of the monument and turned south.

The road from there was terribly washboarded with no relief either on the edge of the road or in any tracks, which was another common way to navigate a surface like that. It was bump, bump, bump so I downshifted and slowly vibrated along. Around the first big bend, a white truck stopped in the road to check on me.

The driver of the truck was an old navy man from Douglas, a Vietnam vet. He was concerned that I knew what I was getting into, and from just there I could see at least another mile of this horrible surface. He warned me about the road but aside from the

washboard, never did say exactly what was the problem. He didn't even tell me how steep it was. I mean, I sincerely wanted to know what it was that I was unprepared for.

As I continued with this line of reasoning, it finally clicked to him that I was prepared, and for anything. At this realization he eased off and we became friends. My plan was to ride over the mountain then down to Douglas and this made him even more friendly because now he had someone to tell about the town, an audience. In the old days, Douglas was an epicenter of smuggling between the two countries. Migrants and weed couriers were a part of life there, the whole economy until the border patrol opened a headquarters. We talked until another truck came down the mountain then I rode on.

Past the last ranch and at the edge of the national forest, the road improved from washboard to rough. Rough was a lot smoother and this was a huge relief. A forest service administrative area was fenced off right there and just beyond it was a water tank half in the fence and half out. This was on a side track which I explored looking for a place to camp. The forest was very thick and around the tank were many bear tracks. Looking closer, scat full of mesquite pods was present on all the approaches to the tank. The bears had marked it well and I retreated to find a safer place to sleep.

The forest was filled with oak and juniper but also covered in the tall grasses that carpet the Sonoran grasslands. I was still low enough in elevation to be in this transition zone and loved it. I put up my hammock between two oaks, built a fire, and made a thick applesauce from the apples that I picked on Mt. Graham. I would eat some of it then and the rest with blue corn tortillas in the morning.

In the morning, Craig, a lifelong cyclist from Tucson, hailed me from his camp. He was astounded that his first sight of the day was me on my fully loaded bike climbing such a tough mountain. His bike was leaning against his car and it had already caught my eye, a really nice touring bike. The sun was just then rising and in its first rays he told me that he was going to ride to Massai Point at the monument later. He was car camping but I could see that he was like me and we were instantly friends.

Craig said that he was the kind of cyclist who liked to do drugs, drink whiskey, and ride lonely roads in the moonlight. He taught English at a high school and we shared a love of writing haiku. Like me, he had many of his own memorized and we tossed them back and forth like wizards casting spells. He laughed and laughed when I recited mine and his verse was equally strong. After this exchange we were more than friends, we were brothers.

He told me about the road ahead, "Ten miles of eight percent grade." Fortunately, that was a wild exaggeration. He wanted me to be ready for the challenge though and said he had just the thing, an ice cold bottled latte. He said, "Drink that now and drink this later." The other bottle was an unlabeled liter of homemade Italian soda. Talk about a welcome to the mountain!

Not too far past Craig's camp there was a shallow stream where I was able to take a nice forest bath.

The mountain beyond there was burned and bare. There were trees but they were young; all the larger trees were standing dead like skeletons on the mountainsides. The road was not an eight percent grade except for a couple short spots but it was steep, probably averaging about seven percent and every bit of it technical riding. I had to watch out for loose rocks, embedded rocks, loose gravel, washboard on the inside of curves, and soft

edges. All this while maintaining stability at only about two or three miles per hour. It wasn't all hard; there were great views west to the Dragoon Mountains and also a few trickling springs.

My relief at reaching the saddle was profound though. The climb had been a great challenge, a worthy ascent, and here at the top was a protected nook, a small glade surrounded by the young trees which were regenerating the forest. Resting there and while I was off the bike, a car pulled in carrying a very friendly looking couple. We started talking right away and they both had strong accents so I asked what their primary language was. The woman replied, "Slovak."

There I was with two Slovaks at the saddle. They'd been to the US six times and were trying to go to every state or maybe had already been. They both spoke English but not very well. The woman sat on the ground with me and we communicated eye to eye. She taught me the Slovak word for peace and it was the same as in Russian, mir.

There was a side road at the pass, a three mile long road that rose a thousand feet to a place called Rustler's Park. Up or down? The day wasn't over yet and all I could think was that as long as it rose, I'd be able to roll back down when I left so I made the turn. It was the same difficult grade as what I had just conquered until it got steeper.

The steep section was freshly graded and covered in a loose crushed limestone which made it hard to get any traction. Earlier in the day I might have been able to ride it but by then I was somewhat fatigued and had to push. The same legs were moving the same bike though.

It was at least half a mile until I was able to ride again and that was at another saddle where I could see out all the way across

New Mexico to Texas. I wasn't exactly sure which range was Guadalupe Mountain but I knew about where it was and it visually made sense. Range after range rose above basin and plain. I knew that country and with it all in sight, I was profoundly placed. I knew where I was in the world and could see both where I had been and where I was going.

There was a strong spring at 8,500 feet and I loved having as much water as I could use. I mean, I loved the water itself too. It was cold and pure, nourishing a large stand of Chiricahua dock, a plant that only occurs there and in two other of the sky islands. I'd met it at the same elevation on Mt. Graham.

Like at the monument, the deer were unafraid. There was one on the spring trail and it didn't even startle as I went by, continuing to graze as if we all had a right to be there. It was still there when I came back with my filled water bottles and had the same reaction, acceptance. I saw more deer crossing the Chiricahuas than I had in the previous two thousand miles and I wondered if they all were like that now, unafraid. Knowing they weren't gave me an even greater awareness of what a magical environment I was in. The mountain was sacred and this wasn't simply an idea. The evidence was right before my eyes. The pure water in my bottles was more evidence, sweet evidence.

The descent in the morning was long, hard, and as technical as the climb. There were no sections where I could release the brakes. I had to be able to stop in a moment for all the same factors that I mentioned about the ascent. I realized as I went that I was going slowly enough that I could hit anything without consequence. The cost was born by my hands which relentlessly squeezed the brakes.

There was a creek at the corner to Paradise and one

simply doesn't ride past a flowing creek in desert country. After I'd rinsed off a bit, I walked, then rested under a shady tree. It was only in looking up that I realized I was under a tall apple tree with some small amount of large ripe fruit high in its branches. Looking around I noticed that the ground under the tree was covered in deer tracks. It's why it had looked so inviting. Every fallen fruit was eaten right away and the ground was smoothed by this annual activity. All I needed to have some myself was a pole, and in a forest, poles are easy to find. With a long forked stick I picked four or five of the deliciously red apples. I ate one to finish my breakfast and stowed the rest for later.

There was a short rise from there to a saddle where I would continue my descent. It was nowhere near as long or hard as what I'd ridden the day before but when I was almost to the top, I found I had a cheering section and heard the words, "Right on," and "You got this." Three young and beautiful medicine tribe sisters were resting in the shade just at the saddle. The third girl never said a word but Kaitlin and Claire and I all became friends.

They were on an herb walk and Kaitlin had plant identification books. I told them about the amazing plant that I'd just found, real obliquely so that they didn't know which plant I was talking about. I spoke about it as if the plant was another being, one that senses like we do but in its own way. I asked how we might allow for communication with a plant and what that might look like. It was only when I got to the part about the plant talking back that I pulled one of the freshly picked apples from my bag. We all laughed.

We talked about cultural perceptions too, that there were other ways of knowing the world. Even right then we were experiencing life, not describing it, but people put the cart before

the horse. There was another way of seeing the world which involved letting go of knowing and dissolving into being. The apple in my hand was an apple not an idea and we could bite into it to find the real world. I continued, saying that knowledge is only known by letting go of knowledge and that we have to "Put down that weight. Gotta get out of your way." They recognized the lyrics with which I was illustrating the concept too and that's when we realized that we were a tribe. We might even have met at Harmony Park, regardless, we were already friends and family by then.

We were all in a space of true presence and this must have been visible. A fourth woman, their mentor, showed up and the sight of us disturbed her. She stopped us right in the middle of the conversation and took my friends away. She said something about them being on an herb walk and that they had to focus on that. She was dissembling though, she saw the results of the teaching shared and knew what was going on. In her eyes I was off topic for what they were doing out there but my friends knew that we were deeply on topic. We smiled in parting.

It was downhill from there and the road was so much better that I could finally coast without riding the brakes so I coasted. In a very humble manner, I was triumphant. I'd climbed the mountain on a rough road in meditation and in prayer. All along the way, fellow beings had toasted to my success, shared greetings of peace from across continents, and cultivated a mind at one with nature. I wasn't thinking about this but my presence rolling down the mountain was informed by it. I was triumphant.

The Southwestern Research Station was just past Cave Creek and had a gift shop, WiFi, and convenient electricity. As I rested there with a cold soda in hand and my with my devices

charging, a Mr. Autrey introduced himself. He was an old ranch hand who had spent many more nights under the desert stars than I ever had. We were very much alike though. We'd both had rattlers come to our bags at night and both had learned how to step past fear and react to things rationally. We discussed this in the context of Psalm 23, "Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." Strong in this, and with a certain confidence from that understanding, we were brothers, unified in nature and in faith.

There were two free campgrounds along Cave Creek Road and I was going to rest at one of them even if I had to force myself. I hadn't taken a full day off since north of Albuquerque and this was just the place for it.

The first camping area was a walk-in site and I left my bike in the parking lot while I explored. It was pretty rough though, the ground at every campsite was rocky, but there was a waterfall and a small pool in the creek. After a quick dip I decided to continue on and hiked back up to my bike. As I was pushing it across the parking area to the road, something fell off, a complete MRE: beef brisket, mashed potatoes, a fat chocolate chip cookie, tootsie rolls, crackers, cheese spread, and carb drink. Somebody had left it on my bike for me and I hadn't seen it at all. It was as if the meal dropped right out of the air. The hippies always say, "The universe provides," and this was welcome evidence.

The next campground was at the end of the road and was perfect. It wasn't so rocky and beside it in the creek was a man-made waterfall with two pools, one of them deep enough to swim in. I explored, cooked the MRE at a picnic table, then finally gave in and set up camp. Momentum can be hard to still but this particular mountain made it easy and I had books to read. By the

time it was dark, I'd modified the fireplace, built a fire, and made cheese and broccoli soup. I made myself at home and sleeping on the ground later was sweet and easy. It was a night of good dreams.

The morning was perfect and started with a big pot of coffee, then a tall stack of pancakes smothered in sugar and cream. Those cakes were something else, simply pancakes made from a boxed mix with blue corn flour and chopped apples but they were thick, moist, and delicious. The campground raven assured me that it would love any leftovers but there were none.

A hawk flew in after I ate, landing in a tree only about twenty feet away. I wished him good hunting, bagged up my water bottles, and went hunting myself, for the trail to Ash Spring. I followed a ridge above Cave Creek then crossed over to Cima Creek, a spectacularly beautiful valley with twisted cottonwoods, tall ponderosa pines, and lush undergrowth of ferns and grasses. It was deep forest and I felt a bear nearby, like it was watching me.

The spring was capped and piped far away but the overflow made pools that were full of fist sized toads. Despite the roar of amphibians croaking, birds singing in the trees, and the burble of the spring formed brook, there was a deep silence there, a peace so profound that no noise disturbed it.

Back at camp, I played in the creek, swimming circles underwater and getting a fish eyed view of the world. The pool was just barely large enough for this. Later I walked up the creek into the wilderness area but not very far.

A forest service worker stopped by later and told me their plans for the campground I was at. They were going to upgrade it and make it a fee area. I begged him not to, knowing that he had no part in the decision, and showed him how useful their most

recent improvements were, not very. We made friends laughing at the ones who did decide these things and continued to talk for quite some time. He had been a driver in Iraq and I knew what that entailed. He'd been under fire several times during his tour and sought his protection the same way I do, the same way Mr. Autrey had. We were brothers in that and he was a good man.

This was such a beautifully restful day. I finished reading a book, patched my shorts, gathered wood and water, and grazed on watercress from the creek. It had rained during the night and there were two more showers during the day but only just enough to wet the ground. There was a big storm farther up the mountain though and it had thick clouds which devoured the range. There was thunder. I tightened up camp and made an early supper in case the storm turned my way but it never did.

Fresh blue corn tortillas were on the menu again that night. These were topped with fried onions, refried beans, and watercress from the creek.

All of this peace and good food made it easy to sleep that night. As usual, I was beneath an open tarp, not in a tent, and I did sleep easily but with an ear to the ground so when my tarp rustled, it woke me right up. It was pitch dark out and I reached for my flashlight but it wasn't where I left it. Luckily, I found it about a foot away and switched it on. In its beam there stood a skunk. This wasn't the dignified skunk of the Pinalenos but a lean bandido of a critter, sleek and fit for raiding.

This little bandit was only about ten feet away and when I turned on my light it stepped closer. I said, "Hey, get out of here," and it considered my command then bolted, dragging my hat. I spotlighted it as it ran up the embankment and into the forest road. My hat had all the things from my pockets in it too. I got up

and followed a trail of coins, lighter, pocket knife, and a hair tie to where the skunk had dropped the hat twenty feet away.

I wondered then what the hell a skunk was planning to do with a hat. I pictured him wearing it with the brim low over skunky eyes and raiding other camps. The image was amusing but the hat simply did not fit the skunk and I needed it for my own purposes. Little did I know but quite another devil would attempt the same theft in just a few days.

Despite the raid in the night, I was still taken by the beauty. I saw it all around me and was simply astounded. It made me realize that if all of everything else was so beautiful, then I likely was too. How could I be the one thing that wasn't beautiful? I wrote:

Indwelling beauty
All around you Within you
In one beauty all

All around me was beauty and there was no doubt about that. The sun didn't simply strike the mountain, it expressed the Glory of Creation. I wrote:

The sun approached her slowly, teasing the tips of her peaks and playfully passing from cloud to caress. He entered her cave with his long hard rays, fully illuminating her cleft and then spent half the day there in her deepest recess.

Allowing for beauty was deeply meditative. I saw what I saw and it was illuminating. It made me think about my own beauty, my path. Who was I and why was I doing this? I wanted to

understand and wrote, hoping that the words which fell upon the page would lend guidance:

Suppose a creator with purpose but who only acts from within its creation. It's all powerful yet follows certain rules. It desires that the creation work, that it be able to solve its own problems, but it allows itself to nudge it by permeating the creation with a present will.

So this creator has an idea, a mission that requires a human to implement but the task is extremely difficult and there are few that have what it takes. It would like a saint to do the job but in the list of necessary skills, no living saints have those particular talents.

So it picks someone willing. One whose existing purpose is already attuned to this greater purpose. It actually worked on him all his life, knowing in advance that no other could do the job. It gave him choice but led him on paths that made him ever more suited for the task.

So that person goes through life with an unexplainable restlessness. He's nudged onto the road early in life and is exposed to higher spiritual knowledge from all revealed sources, the common and esoteric. He learns that there is only one inexhaustible source and that it is accessible via gratitude. He continues down the road singing "Thank you for this day."

Although this reflection didn't provide much guidance on what I was given to do, after all these years I was still grateful and at least had that. The words also made it pretty well clear that I felt called and that's much of what I struggled with. If God called a prophet, how would that person know who was leading them? Additionally, I was unwilling to fill my head with the idea of being something, it would be antithetical to the process to be full of

oneself and also a true prophet would not be out here spreading their own ideas either. I mean, I was in service but the terms weren't written down. All I had to go on was beauty which fortunately was an accurate and useful descriptor.

Also obvious was that the mountain had accepted me. Her gifts of watercress, apples, the sound of falling water, pools ready to swim in, the old growth, and the revelation of the mountain's feminine nature all made me feel right at home, swimming in beauty.

The skunk raid in the night was an indignity though and I was ready to at least move to a different campsite. More than once I'd had animals discover my camp one night then return in force the next night. Raccoons are horrible for this and skunks also have routes so I slowly packed up then rode on, stopping at every view and exploring side roads and trails.

The mountain towered all around me in domes and prominences and it seemed like each dome had a grand cave. I ached to explore and finally parked my bike out of sight behind a boulder to climb to the nearest of the caves. By climb, I mean a true climb up a twenty percent grade, gaining elevation by grabbing the low branches of shrubs above me on the slope. It was no easy scramble. The cave was hugely majestic but full of rodent droppings, deep with it. I tried not to breathe but also explored, knowing that I would not repeat the effort of the climb to find a better cave.

When I got back to my bike, the road was closed for forest improvement. After popping out from behind the rocks I met one of the workers, Juan, and he assured me that I'd picked the worst cave, that they weren't all so full of droppings.

It was time to roll on but I was torn, wanting by then to

spend another night and it amazed me how hard it was to leave. Who would ever want to leave this place? The last campground before Portal was perfect too and one of the campsites really spoke to me but not as loudly as the voice of civilization which was saying that I could get something fresh for supper in town. I wasn't at all out of supplies but this was an attractive idea so I continued on to Portal where unfortunately everything was closed. Instead of turning around, I said goodbye to the Chiricahuas and rode on into a fierce wind.

7

Liberative Beliefs

After all the peace I'd found on the mountain, riding into the wind was easy. The simple fact that I was on my bike made it easy and I knew I would get where I was going wind or not. The going was always hard, that was a given, but I saw peace all around me and this reflected as well as beauty itself did. My practices, the meditations, were for clarity such that I could allow for this essential truth. In this mind, the miles were effortless no matter how hard the riding was.

There was an overpriced store at the highway junction and I was able to get a few things but I didn't stop for long and also blasted through Rodeo. I had my bike, the desert, my meditations, and some small bit of afternoon in which to just ride. That was more than enough and as peaceful to me as Cave Creek had been.

The Welcome Home Chiricahua Apaches Geronimo site was the next most peaceful spot on my route. A shady watered grove in the desert, it was a place where people honored their ancestors. I paid my respects and then rode on to the Geronimo

surrender site where there was a tall monument built with the metates of the conquered people. It was simply a roadside rest and right beside the highway but there was a picnic shelter under which I would string my hammock. The actual surrender of Geronimo took place east of there in Skeleton Canyon.

There were no skeletons in the night nor was there any traffic and I slept peacefully. Waking up in the desert was my next favorite thing after waking up in the mountains. I relished the morning, greeting it with a pot of coffee and a heart open to beauty. When I continued on, it was in the same mind that I was in the night before, present and allowing for place. Aside from the mountains standing miles away on either side of me, the desert was bare, the kind of bare with gorgeous grasslands, occasional stands of mesquite, and small desert animals including a fat tarantula, a praying mantis, and a bright centipede.

Border patrol officers were the only people I saw all morning and there were only a few of them. An observation post stood on a hill above the highway and reminded me of an army outpost which I'd seen in the Baja. It was a strategic spot. There was also a roadside observer parked at the edge of a large mesquite grove. I stopped there for shade too, parking away from the officer. He might not have even known I was there. The only company I had for lunch was a tall mushroom which grew in the shade where I was resting. Past the mesquites there was a cienega, and I was again surprised at how much water is in the desert.

The highway turned west and rose to cross the very southern end of the Chiricahua Range. It was an easy and short climb. Silver Creek was just over the top and there was shade but no stores. A postman who was just then pulling in greeted me with my favorite honorific, "Brother." In front of the mailboxes

was a big and brightly painted box full of free books. It was the largest little free library I'd ever seen. I deposited the two books I'd just finished reading and picked out two more, *Steppenwolf* by Hesse and *The Future is Now* by Krishnamurti.

The first two people to greet me in Douglas also used the honorific brother. As I've mentioned before, that's my favorite salutation. It speaks to the truth of our essential unity.

Although I wasn't planning to cross into Mexico, the store I needed was right by the border and I wound through old neighborhoods past a surprising amount of boarded up houses, many of those with peeled back boards, a sure sign of squatters. Later a man told me about another bicyclist who arrived in town with a big backpack and who stayed in one of those homes until he was kicked out.

The border itself was a tall double fence with a thirty foot wide no man's land in between. Through the fences I could see a nicely suburban city with good homes and new cars parked in the driveways. I ached to cross but didn't have the money. Mexico took care of me before and I knew they would again but I didn't want to take advantage of this. As I contemplated the country, a man approached and offered to cross over for me. He said he would get me anything I wanted. As we talked, he picked constantly at several open wounds on his face. I would have liked a pack of my favorite Mexican cigarettes but didn't want his help with anything. All I needed there in Douglas was more blue cornmeal and my other essential supplies.

The last place where I'd been able to restock was in Safford almost a week earlier and I was out of everything. When I got to the store, I parked in a big nook between the entrance and their garden center and for the second time in two days, my hat

was lifted. The first time was by a real bandit of a skunk. This time it was by a devil, a dust devil. It spun in hard and every bit of litter and dust around me was lifted. I bowed my head and closed my eyes knowing that devils couldn't harm me but it took my hat, lifted it right off of my head, and raised it to the sky. I watched it circle almost a hundred feet high then drift down to the far side of the garden center. A worker saw this all and walked with me around the building. As we reached the far corner, a man came around it with my hat in his hand. He knew it was mine without a word exchanged.

The city park was almost like Mexico except that there were only a handful of people while across the border, the park would have been filled. Those who were there were eating at one of two food trucks. That's what reminded me of the country. One of these enterprises sold the hot dogs of Mexico too, boiled dogs topped with pinto beans, onions, and chili verde and for only a dollar and a half each. I got two. I was hungry, but I also wanted to sit with the men. Sitting in the park with old men is a fine pleasure and being almost old myself, I knew how to appreciate it.

After eating, then filling my jugs at a water faucet, a man who was sitting with his two daughters hailed me, offering a drink and something to eat. I told him that I had just eaten but accepted a soda and sat down. As we shook hands, it was immediately obvious to both of us that we were brothers. He was as excited about that as was I, but he was more excited about a non-profit that he'd formed to support people with PTSD. He was suffering from it himself. All of this came out in the first moments of meeting.

Post traumatic stress is an old friend of mine and I mean that literally. I developed the disorder after a traumatic incident

fifteen years earlier and I faced my fears, made friends with the extremely uncomfortable symptoms, and went from panic to fearlessness. Noticing that his daughters were paying as much attention to what I was saying as he was, the man said to them, "See, it's real. Listen to what he says." He was tickled that his daughters cared and after every point I made, he said it again, "Listen to what he says." When he realized the level at which I understood him, he made me stop and start over. This time on video.

His younger daughter held the camera while I went into some detail about how to manage the disease with cognitive behavioral tools. First disassociate from the label. Always say "Symptoms consistent with PTSD," versus, "My PTSD." Then track those symptoms and identify triggers. They can occur cyclically or consistent with specific events in the environment. With this awareness, the sufferer can breathe through a trigger. This alone can dramatically reduce the severity of attacks.

Then I went farther. The man sincerely impressed me and I wanted him to know how much strength I saw in him. He had the courage to face his own fears and had started a nonprofit to help others. This demonstrated that he had a purpose filled heart and I quite clearly knew the power of that.

The next step I had taken at that point was to cultivate single mindedness through unceasing prayer. Part of the disorder was an endless chatter similar to racing thoughts, I was always judging myself and ultimately giving my power away to nothing. Single minded meditation allowed me to reclaim my power and this had a measurable effect. I shared examples.

Simply having the courage to stand there and talk about this was a measure of my own successful recovery and I made it

very clear that I wasn't better at this than anyone else. He was obviously as strong as me and so were any future listeners. As I talked, I was also eating up bacon wrapped stuffed jalapeños that he'd purchased from the food truck we were near. All of this is on a video which likely ends with me taking another bite of jalapeño.

As delicious as the poppers had been, they hardly touched the delight I felt from meeting this family. The children gained some insight into the disorder their father was living with and they were all thankful for that. Their father offered me a prayer for the road and I happily accepted it. The man's words were full of all the love in his life and he basically thanked God for sending him an angel, asking that the deity reflect back on me all the light I had shared with them.

My work being done there in Douglas, I rode north into the Sulfur Springs Basin. At Elfrida, I'd join back up with my route from two years earlier and at that point would have ridden the entire basin.

The Dos Cabezas peaks came into view as I progressed north. These are huge knobs of rock, face-like prominences visible from much of my route in Arizona so far. They face away from each other and a high valley lies between them. Eighty miles south and across the border in Mexico, there are two more heads, these turned inward. They were twins and portals and someday I hoped to explore all four faces.

The day was wearing on and I'd come a long way from the Geronimo Surrender memorial so I started looking for a place to sleep. There was a park in Elfrida that was a last resort and also the White Water Conservation Area where I'd camped the last time I was in the basin but that was about five miles off my route. As I rode along thinking about where I might go, I came upon the

Arizona Friends Community. This was just south of McNeal.

There have been Quakers in my life since 1985. I like them because they listen for God and don't tend to become full of themselves. They see the light in others like I did, like Catherine, the first Quaker I ever met and the greatest platonic love of my life had done for me. This place had a welcome sign and knowing Quakers, I knew what that meant.

It was also that God told me to stop (so to speak). Every night I knew when I was at the right spot and it was like that. Although there were people living in the community, I didn't see any. There was a common area though and I rested quietly there. Quakers have silence at their meeting and just like that, I held my silence. No one came out. I slept on the picnic table above the tarantulas that controlled the grounds.

Although I'm certain the welcome of the Quakers would have been genuine, I still didn't want to be caught and was up, coffeed, and riding north in the very first light of day. I passed through McNeal and stopped at the park in Elfrida. It was a crossroads where I'd rested two years earlier and had electricity and water. It was still early too, about seven thirty. I'd had cookies with my coffee in the Friend's garden and wasn't hungry again yet, not quite. I worked on my map, planning and seeing my day. I would ride over the Dragoons and down to Tombstone then back up the west side of the range.

Some time passed while my device charged and then a truck pulled up in front of the ranch house across the highway. A man in it hollered out the window at the people in front of the house, "About time to be working!" Then he right away drove across the road towards me.

When he pulled up I gave him the old tree planter's line,

"Can't make no money sitting around," and nodded towards the young men at the house.

He was amused but hid it and asked me then, "Are you hungry?"

I said, "Usually."

He replied, "I didn't ask you usually. Are you hungry now?"

I hemmed and hawed a bit more then said, "Yes."

In fact I didn't need breakfast just then. I had everything I needed. It was only when I was sure that it was a heart gift and not some kind of pity that I finally accepted. There was some question about this too. Was it man to man or not? And it was. Then he wanted me to put my bike in his truck, take me to his place for breakfast, and then give me a ride back. I had a better idea, take my bike across the road to where his workers were working and park it there.

His house was four or five miles south and was a true oasis with shady mesquites, lots of greenery, and water everywhere. Riding there it was just me and him and two dogs. One dog lived in the bed of the truck, the other in the cab and they stayed there when we went in. There was a house dog and a yard dog too along with his father who was very old but sharp as a tack.

The breakfast was two tamales topped with over easy eggs and a roasted green chili. It was a fantastic meal followed by cake and coffee. Mike was truly a great man but the conversation was awkward. He was a by the book Christian, not my favorite type. I mostly bit my tongue remembering that it's polite not to talk about religion or politics. Despite that, the encounter was famously sweet. Thank you Mike Ramirez.

My bike was of course fine with the workers and when I got back to it, they gathered around to meet me like Mike had. One of the boys looked just like him too, he was his nephew and the great nephew of the old man. Miley Cyrus was on the radio singing “The Climb,” a cycling song for sure and a favorite of my daughter. This was melancholic. It made me see the generations from both my own memories and in the lives of the youth who stood in front of me. They were good kids, all four of them, and this as always gave me hope for the future. I of course told them as much.

Regardless of the beauty, I was still troubled by the dogmatism of Mike and his father. My pet peeve was people who put words before truth. Not that words aren’t useful but they are pretty terrible for awareness. Despite the doctrine though, Mike had demonstrated truth. He fed me and brought me into his home. He was a true brother and I thought about this heart connection, that that was where truth resides, not in the head. I wrote:

Dead space between ears
Pretending to be alive.
Not a source of truth.

It was no surprise that people got lost in their heads. I was as much of a victim as anybody else except that I had more or less learned how to put my thoughts aside and release attachment to them. I knew what the malady was and I wrote:

Constant bombardment
False perspectives dominate
No true awareness.

The answer wasn't to renounce the description of things but rather to allow for the fullness of experience before description. Getting caught up in doctrine was a route to spiritual death. The cure was to practice awareness and I wrote:

Awareness occurs
In perception of beauty
Before description

All of these haikus came to me as I rode along and I stopped to write them down, one after another at every decent pull off. I mean, I was present, pedaling under the sky and upon the earth. I heard the birds and felt the heat of the day. Astonished by the beauty, my perception expanded beyond what was visible into a space where a haiku might coalesce around observations. That was presence too.

My next new friend was sixty-five years old, a dirt biker riding an old Yamaha that he'd owned for twenty years. He passed me on the Gleeson road a little ways before the monument for Soldier Hole, then waited for me at the marker. He was a geologist who worked in the oil fields but at heart, he was as much of a dirt road lover as I was. That was his life and we saw ourselves in each other because of this. He was riding towards Ghost Town Road, then over Middlemarch Pass into Tombstone. I would cross the mountain on Gleeson Road, drop down to the town from there, then ride up Middlemarch Road from the other direction.

Gleeson was the ghost town at Ghost Town Road. There were no buildings standing, nothing but the walls of the old saloon and I rested in their shade. The road from there to Tombstone crossed every wash on that side of the mountain range and went up and down with a final big climb into the town. It wasn't an easy ride but before the day was over I would be on a much more difficult route.

Tombstone had a long, motor vehicle free main street full of reenactors and tourists. My new friend, the motorcyclist, was sitting at a restaurant patio, an empty plate in front of him. I greeted him asking, "How's the food?"

He replied, "I can't recommend it," and smiled big. He was surprised to see me again and we walked to a bench to share a smoke and compare our journeys since that morning. Two men, one young and the other middle-aged, were nearby talking about motors, arguing about which was better, an inline six or a V8. Given those choices, I went with the inline six but knew clearly that my heart powered contraption was the best of all. It ran on one cylinder, me.

Six people from Switzerland wholeheartedly agreed and gathered around my bike. I was the closest thing to authentic old west that they'd seen on their tour and they said so. The reenactors looked the part but I was the real deal. They took a bunch of pictures then and before they walked on, one of the women handed me ten dollars. I said to my friend, "Now I have beer money."

My friend and I went into the saloon and ordered a couple beers. Although I had money now, he paid and he paid with a hundred dollar bill. We talked and drank beer together. He couldn't get over that I'd made it all the way there from where we

met, and all in a morning. He also admired my freedom and wanted to support that. When we were ready to go, he gave me all the change from the hundred.

With most of a hundred dollars in my pocket, I could buy something fresh for supper and head for the mountains. Cochise Stronghold was within reach, twenty some miles up yet another combination of gravel, dirt, and rock roads. It had been thirty-four years since I'd been there and my memories were calling me back. It's where I met my first wife. I only needed to get a few groceries and I'd be ready to ride on. Unfortunately, Tombstone does not have a grocery store, only a few markets. People who live there shop in Sierra Vista.

One of the two convenience stores in town usually had potatoes but they were out except for two nearly rotten spuds so rotten that the clerk offered them to me for free. Only one of the two was worth taking. There was a food desert store too and I stopped there for tortillas, pop tarts, and cookies. A woman there told me that there was no water in the Stronghold. I rode on anyway, figuring that if I couldn't find water, I'd just turn around. I carried two days worth and had been known to ride out of the desert with my bottles full.

The first desert spring I encountered was a spring of common humanity. This was in the middle of the desert on Middlemarch Road halfway to the mountain. This water of life flowed from the heart of a young border patrol officer. He stopped to offer me water but my jugs were already full. To honor his humanity though, I drank off a liter and let him top me up. He was the first of many very kind border patrol officers that I would meet as I crossed the state.

The sun set before I reached my corner but twilight in the

desert lingers so I had time to turn off Middlemarch and make it a few miles up the forest road before full dark. Middlemarch had been a maintained county road and now I was on a primitive forest service route on a moonless night with twelve miles still to go to the West Stronghold. No way was I going to ride it all in the dark but I turned on lights and kept going until I found a spreading mesquite in which I could hang my hammock.

Although I was able to see plenty by starlight, and this was dark sky country so this was brilliant, the sight which greeted my eyes the next morning was even more glorious. I was right where the mountains met the basin. Above me, rock monoliths towered, standing thirty to sixty feet above the slope of the mountain they climbed. There were hundreds of these stones and I was right against them. The basin of the San Pedro River lay below me and I could pick out the routes which I'd walked and hitchhiked so many years earlier.

There was a man at a camp about a mile farther up the forest with the brightest blue eyes, the kind of eyes that look like God is peering out of them. We talked about the river which was still visible far below us. I loved what had happened to it since it was made into a protected riparian area. It's alive and vital but he had a different opinion. He thought it was healthier when it was privately owned cow pasture. He claimed that the sycamores drank so much water that it dried up the river. I didn't argue with him but noted that he might be ignoring the effect on the water table. He was grateful that I'd listened and I rode on with his blessing.

The road continued along right on the edge of the granite giants and after a few miles I noticed an informational sign twenty feet or so off the road. I turned on the trail towards it to see what

it said and right away a man riding the most handsome stallion that I'd ever seen came over the rise.

The cowboy was named Loren and his horse was Wyoming. He owned the old horse ranch on West Stronghold Canyon and explained that it was a historic property, the original settlement on that side of the mountain. That I also had history there fascinated him. He was equally taken with my recent past and my mission to spread peace. His own peace filled me and it was a positive feedback loop. We were both uplifted.

We were in fact glorifying each other and this was felt so he understood. I mean, our camaraderie is how I explained my purpose. As so many others had been, he was grateful for the respect too and accepted that love was the carrier. In our few words, and even in the image of him on that beautiful horse, I saw the love in him and I'd soon see just how much love he had.

The sign I'd stopped for marked the trailhead to Slavin Gulch and after Loren left, I leaned my bike on the sign and hiked a mile or so up it. There's nothing to note from the hike except that it was nice to be off the bike for a bit.

Loren and Wyoming were still out riding the range looking for stray cows when I rode on. They were far back in the brush but I saw them at work from a mile or so up the road. After a few more miles, he caught up with me in his truck. By then he was done range riding. Wyoming was loaded in the trailer he was pulling and he was on his way home. As he pulled up he said, "I thought about what you're doing and wanted to give you this." In his hand was a five dollar bill.

"You don't need to do that. I've got money."

He insisted though, "Nevertheless."

Accepting his offering I said, "Those are some nice looking

cows. I'm originally from Iowa and we have corn fed beef there. I wonder if there's much difference." This was just small talk but I added, "There weren't any grocery stores in Tombstone."

He didn't hesitate, nor did he tell me what he was going to do, but told me to ride on to some landmark which I would see in a few more miles and wait for him there. When he caught up with me again, he had a great gift: two pounds of hamburger, jerky, an avocado, potatoes, grapes, a quart of yogurt, bread, and cheese. This was love.

The final stretch of road to my campsite was all rock, two miles of stream washed rocks that at one time had been a decent road. It was unrideable and I pushed most of the way. The campsites were in an oak grove at the very top of the road and no sooner had I leaned my bike against a tree than a javelina joined me. It was surprised but unconcerned to see me there and moved on when I told it to go. The deer were equally unbothered by my presence and they grazed within thirty feet of me several times during my stay.

It was only early afternoon by then and after setting up my camp and finding and filtering water, I went exploring, looking for where I'd camped thirty-four years earlier. I did find a place where I remembered swimming but it was dry and I wouldn't find my old campsite until later.

When I got back to camp I dismantled, cleaned, and rebuilt the firepit using the extra rocks to make stars all around the camp. I thought of them as wards and set the intention that they keep skunks and snakes away. I put a crystal on top of each one and as I did, memories came back to me.

The crystals were like keys and as I set them down the past was unlocked. Wave and Whitney had both brought

impressive crystal collections with them to that first gathering. I remembered Whitney talking about how his big dreadlock had formed all in one night and remembered how Wave put his heart into the symbols he was carving on the peace pole. There was a beautiful round-faced sister with glasses but I couldn't remember her name although writing this now, I wonder if this was Wyndwalker, the mother of Loki who I'd met in Scottsbluff. Then there was the man with five wives who courted and married a sixth while I was there. Another man, Indra, told tales about walking barefoot in a white robe all through Mexico. There were Quebecois too: Jacque Fournier, Marie-Chantal, and others, some of whom were members of Cirque du Soleil. Also present were Preacher Mike, David Crocket Williams Jr., Jodey Bateman, Rasta Hari, and many others.

This first gathering was in the spring of 1984 and after it, many of us walked to Big Mountain to raise awareness about the forced relocation issue. There was another gathering there in the spring of 1985 and during that one, the forest service shut us down and kicked us out. Some people hid and when we heard in Tucson that they needed supplies, about eight of us piled in a van with backpacks full of food. We drove to the East Stronghold, hiked over the mountain with their relief, and set up camp ourselves. Within a few days, my camp was raided, dismantled, and my best things stolen while I was up the canyon swimming. Forest Service law enforcement officers and federal marshals did this.

I wanted to find that camp. It had been a brilliant spot except that I had no idea how visible it was, not until the next morning when I hiked the trail to the East Stronghold. It was no surprise that they had found it back then either. From the trail, my tarp would have stood out like a sore thumb. The rock itself,

the one I'd been camped next to, actually looked like a thumbs up.

My thumbs were up for the beauty I was walking through and I continued up the trail over the pass to Half Moon Tank, a small reservoir built eighty years earlier which was a lifeblood for the wildlife. From the tank, I bushwhacked to the high points around me, scrambled through the rocks, and from the top looked out to the Chiricahuas, the Pinalenos, and everything else I'd been riding through over the past several weeks. It was a bird's eye view and looking the other direction, I could see ahead to the other mountains which I knew well from my ride two and a half years earlier and would soon cross again.

Bushwhacking through the rocks was heavenly to me. It was a Peter Pan type adventure and my eternal boy loved every minute of it. Hopping boulder to boulder and wending between clusters of them, I danced back to the trail near the pass then returned to camp, greeting all the other people who had arrived after I did.

These others were all rock climbers and all women. They weren't unfriendly but weren't social either. They were there to climb, rest, and climb more and not at all curious about me. They weren't dismissive either, simply busy climbing. Their presence made me wonder about the feminine nature of the mountain. The Chiricahuas were still on my mind too and there the feminine was so bold as to be a feature of the landscape.

With Loren's gift, I had plenty of food and since I'd found water, there was no reason to be in a hurry about leaving so I spent most of the next day in camp repairing my bags. I made a patch, "1Love," and sewed it on my pannier. Then I sewed on the permutations of peace, love, and harmony patch that I'd begun right near there two and a half years earlier. I thought about how

as a minimalist, that everything I carried should have multiple uses and that the patches both repaired holes in my bags and also furthered my mission. They were my propaganda, straight from my own Department of Liberative Beliefs.

After I was done with the repairs, I took another hike through the past. The forest in the bottom was thick and beautiful and I found the one place that fit my memories of where Whitney might have set up the yurt. I remembered this well. Back then, I was the lightest limber person and had been the one to shimmy up the poles and set the cupola. I also remembered the night that about seventy of us were inside it, high on psychedelics and singing, "We shall lift each other up." My friend Michelle, who was there but not in the yurt, told me later about coming over the ridge that night with Weston and being freaked out because the yurt was pulsing blue light. There was no such lighting in the yurt.

On the morning of the next day, I took a hike up North Canyon. One of the climbers had told me of a valley with ferns and running water. The canyon, even mostly dry, was lush with grasses and ancient trees. I scrambled up the boulders following the stream course to a towering set of rocks with a rivulet dropping between them. This was the place where I was supposed to turn but the climb from there, although not extreme, was too technical and alone, it wasn't worth the risk so I backtracked, then continued up North Canyon astounded by the beauty of all the wildflowers, by the beauty of everything.

Full of beauty and at peace with my past, I packed up when I returned to camp. The tortured nature of the road really astounded me, and as I made my way out, I found it hard to believe that I had pushed my bike all the way up there. When I could finally ride again, it was still a long way to Middlemarch

Road, much less to civilization. The old road to St David, the route I'd walked out after the federal marshals forced us to leave back in 85, was private now and I would have had to lift my bike over a locked gate to ride it. Loren had told me about it too so I was considering it. There was also a side trail that runs from Slavin Gulch across the desert to the highway, a section of the Sky Island Traverse perhaps. At least the first part of that trail was sand though and without more information, I couldn't take it. The desert is no joke. I stuck to the also quite difficult forest service road and retraced my steps.

Halfway back to Tombstone a truck passed me, stopped, and a man and three children got out. A range cow was beside the road and they wanted to make friends with it. They were all like, "Here cow! You're so pretty." I was astounded and wasn't going to say anything but the driver, a young woman named Lynn who was still in the truck, motioned to me and offered a ride. I of course refused, my liberation as always was to go on my own power. In addition, I was on my way down a hill that I'd struggled up and could see myself rolling pretty much all the way to the San Pedro River. I'd never give that up. The offer was kind though and we became friends. She mentioned that there were several people looking for caretakers around there and I imagined what it would be like to stop and be somewhere. The hill called to me again though and its voice was strong. I would coast to the bottom of the basin and continue on.

It was late afternoon by the time I got to Tombstone again. My goal was laundry. Although I'd found water on the mountain to filter and drink, there hadn't been enough to even rinse a shirt out. Conveniently, the first place in town was a laundromat but unfortunately, their change machine didn't work. Because the banks had been closed for Indigenous Peoples Day the day before,

the store next door would not make change either; they were holding on to the few quarters they had. Fortunately, the next store agreed to sell me four dollars worth. Quarters were that tight in Tombstone.

After I started the machine, a very decrepit old man pulled up, peeled himself slowly out of his truck, laboriously stooped down to pick up a coin he spotted on the ground, then ambled to the door which I was holding open for him. He came in and very seriously confronted me saying, "What are you doing to my machine?"

There was a surveillance camera in the laundry and I'd parked my bike inside near the change machine. The perspective of the camera had made this look nefarious. I defused this by pointing out that I was a customer and he slowly noticed that I'd held the door for him and when he bent again to pick up some small debris that had caught his sharp eye, I'd said, "Allow me." just before we left the library the librarian gave the boy a snack, animal crackers and a juice box. He just about gagged on an animal cracker but drank the drink as we walked to Whole Foods. As soon as we got in the door he says, "I need to go to the bathroom." So I get him in there and up on the toilet just in time for him to explode a giant squirt into the bowl. After he was sure he was done, I got him cleaned up and then we went to the deli to get a snack. I mean, I needed to eat something and got a slice of pizza. So we go to the seating area and he takes one bit of the pizza and dang if he didn't explode from the other end too. I caught a good bit of it with the pizza tray but even more slid down the front of his shirt, over his pants, and filled up the chair. By then I had him gently above this lake of vomit so we wouldn't have to swim in it and when he was done, I took him back to the bathroom and quite easily cleaned him up. They had paper towels

and hot water. He was queasy for just a little bit but felt fine after all that. I was impressed with myself too for taking it all in stride and grateful that we'd been next to a restroom for all this. He wouldn't allow me though. As difficult as it was for him, he slowly and painfully bent down, picked it up, and dropped it in the trash can. That's when he decided that I was okay. Then, while he was still there but outside, the washing machine failed. He was good for it though and actually gave me enough extra quarters for the dryer too.

That wasn't the end of my challenges for the night. It was pitch dark and I still had to make camp. In addition, a bored cop was doing patrol loops through the town and made his turnaround in the laundromat parking lot. I knew he'd be watching me so I greeted him, asked him where the nearest spot was that I could legally camp (of which he had no idea), then told him where I could legally camp. That I knew the area better than him pretty well disarmed him. When he understood I'd be leaving town as soon as my clothes were done, he didn't have to watch me anymore and drove off to do another round.

It was an eight mile night ride from there to the San Pedro River. With light, I'm sure there would have been plenty of places to stop and shadows beside the road spoke of perfect nooks. It was so dark though that all I could see clearly was a small bit of the pavement ahead and I knew there was a spot at the river. I didn't usually like riding highways at night but it was a good ride and I was enjoying it. It made me think about Craig, the cyclist I'd met in the Chiricahuas who said that he was the kind of rider who liked to do drugs, drink whiskey, and ride lonely roads in the moonlight.

Even without the moon, I was having at least as much fun

as Craig had. In the starlight, I found my way to a trailhead at a historic site and followed the trail as far as I could, which wasn't actually very far. I stopped where the trail went down a difficult slope, crossed a wash, then tunneled through thick grasses before getting to the good camping in a mature mesquite forest on the San Pedro River. I would discover all of that in the morning along with many petroglyphs but for now I simply rolled out my bags on the fine gravel in front of a bench. I couldn't get the bike any farther in the dark.

This was the first cold night of the year at this elevation. There wasn't much moisture in the air but what little there was condensed on my ground cloth and froze up about an hour before sunrise. I watched this happen as I was already awake making a pot of coffee on a small twig fire by then. My bed was rolled up and the bike packed before even the earliest birdwatcher would have been out. After a cold night with this light morning frost, I walked the trail towards the ruins of the old mill town.

The trail also led to petroglyphs carved by the ancients. These were inscriptions so old that the hunters were depicted with atlatls. Along with images of the wildlife they hunted, there were also snakes, lightning, and spirals. I didn't know it then but this was also the site of a huge battle in 1698. More than 500 Apaches and their allies attacked a Sobaipuri village near there and against all odds, the eighty defenders defeated the larger force. There were more modern inscriptions too, made by the settlers who milled the ore from Tombstone.

In the 1880s, this was the town of Fairbanks and it was the closest railroad station to Tombstone and also had a mill to process ore. It wasn't a small town either and there were rows of streets between foundations of old buildings. The mill had been

huge and rock walls were still standing along with large piles of tailings.

The trail led on through a mature mesquite forest. That's when I wished that I'd been able to push my bike in farther the night before. Despite their thorns, I loved mesquite trees. They were the life of the desert, reaching far into the earth and touching the sky. I'd spent many nights among their branches dancing with the stars and to be here among so many ancient ones astounded me. Closer to the river there were large cottonwoods, grasses, herbs, and thick brush. The river itself was on the far side of an old canal which itself was inviting and running clear. It was still too cold out or I would have jumped in.

At Sierra Vista I crossed my route from 2016 and thought about the friends I'd made there two years earlier. Back then, I helped a man decorate his house for Halloween and washed cars, all to earn the money for my passport. I was on a new road now though and about to cross the Huachuca range into some of the most remote parts of Arizona. All I needed was electricity for my devices, a few more groceries, and a map. I wasn't at all in a hurry until I realized that I just had time to get to the forest service office for the motor vehicle use map of the district. These maps are free and show all the roads in the forest. They're also one sided so can be used for note paper or drawing and they also burn really well for starting fires. I would often cut them down, reserving only the parts with usable information and reusing the rest for these other purposes. Unfortunately, they were out but they had a copy that I was able to photograph.

The receptionist through all this was not very helpful. It was close to the end of the day and she was watching the clock. After I left though, I met an old-timer type of forest service

worker at a nearby store, and although he didn't have the map I needed, he was very helpful and told me where I could camp in Miller Canyon. I mean, one can camp almost anywhere on the Coronado National Forest, and it was all around me, but he sent me to a really good spot.

As I rode up Miller Canyon Road I went by a ranch where there were three German shorthair dogs. My old dog Brenna was of that breed and I knew all about them so when I met Bill Conyers farther up the road and he started talking about quail, I knew they were his dogs. We talked about the three species of quail in Southeast Arizona and their habitat and behavior. Then he sprang the big question about being saved. I certainly feel like I am and am not shy about saying so. It's a great opportunity to share my version about what being saved means and I did. I also told him some of the works I've been given to do and he pointed out that it wasn't by works that we're saved. He said, "It's by grace. We're washed in the blood of the Lamb."

I didn't understand this concept of being washed in the blood very well and had to think about it. What does it do for a soul to know, really know, that they are loved unconditionally? That's grace. From a psychological standpoint, we wash each other like this every time that we meet eye to eye and forgive each other our faults. Was that being washed in the blood? We grant grace all the time in an effort to be friends too, to love each other. We are also granted grace and there's a great psychological value in recognizing this. I am loved. You are loved. This grace is next to useless though unless we accept it. Could you be loved? Are you lovable? These are big questions and they all came up for me within this one concept, grace. I wanted to be washed like that. But in blood?

Bill and I parted gracefully and the site above there in Miller Canyon was perfect. There was wood, water, and a usable fire pit. I cooked something or another and got a very peaceful night's sleep. I thought about Bill too, that I should visit him in the morning and ask him if he had a spare sleeping bag. It was weird to me that the thought was so specific. I didn't ask for things.

In the morning I stopped by to see Bill. I knew it was his place because of the dogs and didn't really want to bother him but the thought the night before had been so distinct. So, I stopped at the open gate. There was a no trespassing sign hanging there and those signs are like a cross to a vampire for me. I'd need an invitation to cross it and it only took a minute for Bill to come out to give me one. He said, "I hoped that you would stop by."

Bill invited me in and when I told him where my daughter worked he had a product from the same company and offered it to me. It was simply a drink but this offering more than anything made me feel like family. I mean, we were brothers in Christ already and the man was so much of an angel that he connected this to my blood family. It was heartwarming like that and he fed me the fattest double-stuffed slice of pizza that I've ever had.

Without telling me exactly what his job was, Bill told me about his work in Kuwait. He said that he was there during a time when contractors like him were murdered by the police and he talked about the fear he had experienced doing that. Like me, he didn't currently have any fears.

Bill's wife was Japanese-American and we each shared the few Japanese words we knew. My dad served in Japan in 1946 and I'd treasured his old phrasebook when I was a boy.

After getting to know each other like this, I told Bill about

my unusually specific thoughts from the night before and he indeed had a new sleeping bag for me, an oversized mummy bag with a waterproof outer liner. It was equal to both of my bags and would have just rotted there if I hadn't asked for it.

Coronado Memorial Park was right on the border and I stopped just inside the entrance. It had been a moderately difficult climb to get there, all in view of a new, twenty-six mile long border wall that divided the continent from near Douglas to there. It continued on past me but I could see to the end of it where the old four wire barrier continued over the mountains.

Just as I was getting back on my bike, a National Park law enforcement officer drove up from a side road and rolled down his window. The officer was smiling, happy to see me there because some years previously he had bicycled across the country too. This made us friends and we traded tales of our greatest adventures. Mine were all from my journey but his was from a capture he'd made on the mountain, and he was pointing at specific spots that we could see from right there. He tracked and captured two Latin King members who had been running from the cartels. I thanked him for making the route safe for me and he sent me off with great enthusiasm.

There was an information center for the park but it was all fluff. They had some little bit of information about the explorer but nobody knew Coronado's exact route and they didn't claim to. There were helmets and chainmail that people could try on and lots of overpriced mementos in the gift shop. It was a nice quiet stop though, quiet until a senior center activity bus arrived that is. Those old folks were rambunctious and to escape their chatter, I rode on. The pavement ended just past there and it would be five days before I would reach another paved road.

8

Be Yourself and Play

The road from the visitor center to the top of Montezuma Pass rose more than a thousand feet and unfortunately was freshly graveled and graded making it too loose for a bicycle. I had to push almost the entire way, about two miles. This was hard but every now and then as I struggled on I heard laughter. At first I didn't know what I was hearing but when it made sense, I smiled too and my burdens were eased.

Two women and four children were just returning to the parking lot when I reached the top and they were still giggling, simply full of joy. I told them what I'd heard and thanked them for making the climb easier, for brightening my day. I said, "This is how valuable your love is to the world." They were Hawaiian and as they left, six heartfelt alohas rang out.

A forest service truck pulled in just then and out stepped two old men, both wearing twenty year service pins. I honored them for sticking with it for so long and as we talked, they figured out that I was in service too. We were all motivated by a love for people and for the environment. This had guided our lives and we

were brothers in this. Wanting to help me along, they explained where I would find running water in Bear Canyon.

A comfortable picnic shelter at the pass looked out over the desert both to the east and to the west and I could see for a hundred miles in more than one direction. When I was finally alone there, I opened my pannier to get out a beer which I'd saved to celebrate the climb. As I picked it up I didn't at first understand why the can was light but it only took a second to realize that something had punctured it. This was a disaster. My sleeping bag, extra jeans, patches, and spare tubes were all soaked in beer. My only consolation was that about a third of the brew was still in the can and I drank that. I'd just pushed my bike up a long steep grade and deserved at least a third of a beer.

As I finished up the remains of my drink, two retired Navy men pulled in, a father and his son. The father served three years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days but for some reason was drummed out one day before benefits would have kicked in. The son served twenty-two years. Like with the park workers, service was the key to our connection. My service right then was thanking them for their service and together we talked about what it meant to be a good man. They both were and it was obvious from the camaraderie we were sharing that I was too. We were good men there together and I thanked them for that. As I was rolling out, the younger man handed me twenty dollars saying, "Thank you. God bless you."

Most of the traffic turned around there at the pass but I continued down the south side of the Huachuca Mountains into a thick and beautiful oak forest. It covered the entire upper slope of the San Rafael Valley from peak to border and was stunningly beautiful. The north and east slopes of the mountain had all been

burned but here over the pass was the thickest forest I'd seen since the White Mountains.

The border patrol was out in force and most of them stopped to make sure that I was okay. The first officer told me that they'd just chased five men but most of them had escaped. I teased all the rest of the officers that I met about this, "They got away, eh?"

Two photographers were taking pictures of plants at Bear Canyon. These were the only civilians I would see in this whole long stretch except for a rancher the next day. They ignored me and when I greeted them they were rude. Civility is a hallmark of country life and if in the backcountry, it's best to be kind. I usually brush it off but this time I said, "People are nature too." That made the woman look at me but the man kept his nose down.

It was only late afternoon by then but I had already crossed an entire mountain range and the canyon had water. I needed to clean up the mess in my pannier so I decided to set up camp early. Finding the perfect spot was not so easy though. There were plenty of nooks as always but the one spot with a good supply of firewood, (which I would need to dry my things after washing them), was more accessible than I liked. It was right off the road, a very short distance down a side lane. It had a view of the whole area and by the tracks, the border patrol clearly used it for observation. It was also a hunting camp where the last people had left piles of cut wood and that made it perfect.

While my gear dried next to the fire I built, and while my supper was cooking, a young border officer pulled in. As I mentioned above, I teased him and all the others I would meet later about the migrants getting away. He was a really good man though and took this well. I mean, he had a cross somewhere,

either on him or in his vehicle and noticing it, I had to test him, finding then that he had a heart full of love and faith. This felt like family to me. It turned out that the young man was happily married with young children and his love for them was brilliant. I was flipping potatoes and zucchini which sizzled in my frying pan as we talked. This was a divine moment. We both gave credit to greater conceptions of ourselves and were brothers in this.

The contrast between him and the next officer was striking. Ferguson was a hardass and acted tough but like all the rest, the migrants had outrun him that day. I knew better than to rub it in too hard but gave him the kind of jab which brought out his governing structure. He was a hardass and it was like that. Much later, when I thanked the commander at the last border patrol checkpoint north of Sonoita for the many kindnesses the corps offered me, we would laugh at how much of a cop this one officer was.

The only civilian I saw all the next day was a rancher in an old jeep out checking his cows. Dale was 85 years old and his great grandparents came over the mountain from Tombstone but not over Montezuma Pass; they took the old wagon road which is now part of Fort Huachuca. He pointed the route out as he spoke and the mountain stood above us entirely in view.

Dale was a very happy man. It was a good year and he'd never seen the range so lush. Thick grasslands spread for miles, all the way to the mountains surrounding the broad basin. Dark clouds stood above them to the west and Dale told me about a tropical storm which was just then battering Mexico and on its way north. To a desert dweller, a chance of rain is almost like heaven itself descending and that was part of the reason for his grand smile. I wished him many more good years, "For you, not

only for the range."

Schoolhouse Canyon was the next best place to stop. There were a few trees and quartz sparkled in the dry wash. I looked at rocks while I was resting and picked up a couple of tiny crystals. I tried to imagine people settling there. At one time there had even been enough of them for a school. I wondered if they came over the Huachucas like Dale had or if they'd filtered in from across the border which would have been quite open back then.

Two border patrol officers pulled up while I was resting on the bridge over the San Rafael River. Like all of the other officers I'd met they said, "If there's anything you need, let us know," but all I needed was water. One of these two officers was a woman and when she saw the haikus which were written on my bag, she was overcome. She loved the poems and particularly loved that form of poetry. The other officer didn't care much for poetry but also had a good heart and gave me a banana, a pear, and a small snack package with a sunflower seed and raisin mix. After they left, I wrote another poem:

To liberate self:
Surrender to unity
Be yourself and play

My maps showed a state park just past the river but it had been closed for years and the road was bordered by signs prohibiting hunting, camping, and hiking. This preserved a pristine grassland that extended half a mile to the border fence and beyond. The grasslands were soon dotted with oak and juniper until by Lochiel it was a veritable savanna.

Lochiel was nearly a ghost town but a ghost town with a

little free library, an old school, and a church on a hill. Formerly a border crossing, it was now fenced but I imagined the old days when there were customs officers from two lands paid to look the other way. There was also a monument to Fray Marcos de Niza who explored near there in 1539. His reports on what he found led to the Coronado expedition.

The road was sandy after Lochiel and the landscape was serene with large oaks amid thick and tall grasses extending into the distance. It was uphill but not at a difficult grade until almost to Duquesne. From there it was a mountain road that soon entered a narrow canyon then climbed over ridges and through drainages on the east slope of the Patagonia Mountains. The first two of these climbs were impossible to ride both for the steep grade and for their loose gravel surface. I pushed up, coasted down with my hands on the brakes, then struggled up the next hill.

The mountainside had a lot of mines and homesteads but I didn't see any people. There was one driveway with a hand painted sign blessing all people with peace and I walked back the lane which ended at a clearly posted gate; there was again no sign of life. I walked back to the road, left a crystal that I found in Schoolhouse Canyon on top of the post for the sign, and rode on.

After a final steep hill I came out into a beautifully serene wide mountain valley. There was a great place to camp just above a big meadow except that the campsite was polluted with everyday trash, used toilet paper, and the freshly skinned hide of a poached deer. I rode on. I did need a good place to camp, the hurricane that pounded Mexico the day before was on its way, but I could certainly do better than that.

Guajolote Flats was at the top of the divide. It was a large

level area covered in oak, juniper, and manzanita lying below Guajolote Mountain. Behind an unlocked forest service gate, a large juniper tree sitting far back from the road spoke my name and I set up camp. I'd again crossed all of a basin in a single day then wound my way up the mountains on the other side.

The storm arrived in the night and it rained until the next afternoon. My shelter was dry but I had to rebuild my fire in the morning after which I made coffee and pancakes, patched my jeans, read a book, wrote, and gathered more wood. After the rain stopped, I hiked in the mud and looking at the road realized that I was stuck there until it dried out.

Guajolote Flats were a paradise and they fed me. Tree ear mushrooms grew on fallen oaks and I picked them to eat with beans, potatoes, and onions later. I also cut a piece of manzanita and roughed it out into the shape of a pipe. I'd lost my last manzanita pipe in Mexico a year and a half earlier.

The mushrooms were a real treat. I'd eaten the variety before but never fried them and smiled when they popped and crackled in the hot oil. By the next day, I'd found other mushrooms too. The most surprising were giant puff balls. I had no idea that they grew on desert mountains and there amid them were golf balls. It being such a huge flat, someone came up there to practice their drive. This is worth mentioning because the balls looked like seeds for the mushrooms.

Puffballs were never my favorite but they were edible so I tried again, this time dusted in pancake flour and fried in coconut oil. They were delicious made this way and had a similar texture to the lightest scrambled eggs. I also found a suspiciously psychedelic looking mushroom growing from under a cow patty. I'd eaten a lot of mushrooms growing from cow patties. This one

had a bulb at its base though and did not stain purple when crushed.

The rainwater which I collected from my tarp was stained and tasted sharp even after filtering. I wondered if it was because of falling through the juniper. It wasn't very drinkable although I did use it for cooking and washing. Exploring farther, I found clear water in a couple small pools at the top of Harshaw Creek and filtered that to drink.

There was more and more rain. It rained for three days. My fire was just outside of the tarp though and I could sit warm and dry next to it. There was plenty of firewood which I fed to the flames a tree at a time letting the fire cut it for me. I made the best of my time under the tarp too, even finding a stout wire which I heated red hot in the oak fueled coals to burn a stem hole in the new pipe. A broken concrete block became an oven and I baked bread.

The morning of the fourth day actually dawned. There was sunshine and a promise of a rideable surface. After checking to see if the road was solid again, I broke camp and rolled downhill towards the next ghost town, Harshaw. The ride was magnificent, down a valley shaded by giant sycamores. The old town itself was nothing more than a few adobe ruins although there was still an active mine in the area. Trucks full of ore made their way around me as I rolled along.

Patagonia was having an art festival and their park was full of people. An old navy veteran told me about his eighteenth birthday party back in the sixties. His dad gave him a six pack of beer and a steak dinner. After he was done with it all, his dad asked him how it was. Well, it was really good and after thanking his father for the meal and everything, the old man said, "Glad

you enjoyed it. Now you have thirty days to get out." That's when he enlisted and that's when he went to Vietnam.

The fire department stand was selling burgers topped with everything for five bucks and I still had the money that I was given at Montezuma Pass. This was a real meal and a treat after five days on the mountain. I was so happy with this that I must have glowed and a small group of photographers gathered around. I was the Old West that day like I had been in Tombstone. One of the men took a bunch of pictures, later sending me the best one.

There was electricity and free WiFi set up for the festival so I charged my devices and checked in with all my loved ones. When I was all set, I went to a library book sale but it didn't have any interesting books for me. There was an old man at a bed and breakfast next door though and he'd been at the Oregon gathering the previous year. We might even have met and we talked about the old days at other gatherings which we'd both been at. We were family and this touched my heart.

Back at the festival, I met a young couple. The girl, Kristi, reminded me of my cousin Bailee. They both made me feel confident in them. Not by anything they did or said but simply a heart feeling that it was important to believe in them. Kristi felt this without a word said and cried without any tears. I mean I had to ask if she was crying and she was. I'd just sang them the first verse of "Love Letters to God" and she cried because I was giving from my heart. They also made a very generous trade with me. I had mushrooms that I still hadn't used and they had herb.

Fresh food was the next order of business so I bought a few potatoes and onions at the health food store and then a pound of bacon to fry them in at the grocery. By then I knew I'd go back

up Harshaw Creek a couple miles to where I'd spotted a campsite.

When I came out of the grocery store I ran into Hector. He'd met another cyclist sometime in the past and I reminded him of the other rider. In that memory Hector said, "I'm going to cook you a steak dinner." I told him where I was going to camp and he knew the place, calling it The Oak.

Although it took Hector so long to get there that I thought he forgot about me, I didn't cook any other supper. When he did arrive he was totally drunk as was his friend, a much younger woman. They built up my fire but didn't know how to. I secretly laughed as they futilely played with it. I would fix it after they left.

The meal was cold but prepared with a lot of love. There was steak, baked potato, cake that the woman's children had frosted for me, chocolate bars, Hershey kisses, chips, cigarettes, beers, and a lighter.

We talked but they were the kind of drunk people who can only hear themselves. He listened and she tried. I mean, she really wanted to listen but I think it made her dizzy. It was easy to be family with them despite this. Their hearts were clear in the offerings they'd brought me. We parted with many hugs and I finally ate.

Back in Patagonia the next morning, I charged my devices at a coffee shop and the clerk was really at home there. I thought she was the owner from the way she obviously cared about the place but mentioning this, it became clear that she just happened to be present. She made herself at home and this was a beautiful quality.

Working there was her job but it was also her life and she was really living it. Her husband and father-in-law arrived a bit later and their love was tangible too. Particularly striking was

how much she loved her father-in-law, a very likable man. They all knew Mexico well and were a ready audience for my stories about the country. We laughed together. This was as much like family as the encounter with Hector had been, likewise with Kristi. Was my family everywhere?

After more than a month in the high desert mountains, I was still ready for more and at least wanted to give them a proper farewell. With nothing but time on my hands, I made my way up Temporal Canyon. A friend in town had told me about it, although later I wondered that seeing my road bike, he'd sent me up such an extremely challenging road. I certainly didn't make it as far as he had suggested. The creek was running right down the road. It was the road.

Rocks, steep grades, and even wading through a running stream were all par for the course and just what I was looking for. It was hard enough. I kept going until finally it was too steep and from there turned back to an old camping site which I'd noticed on the way up. This was next to a narrow side canyon which cut through the rock of the mountain.

The existing fire pit at the site was useless for cooking so I rebuilt it, discovering in the process a huge heart shaped rock that I incorporated into the design. With the heart fire burning, I set up my tent and prepared for the night, completely unaware that a hard rain was about to fall.

When the rain arrived it came in all of a sudden and I wasn't ready for it but soon would be. Sometimes one has to get wet to keep dry and that's what I did. There was firewood a couple hundred yards up the canyon and I hustled that to the fire, building up a pile of wood that hopefully would burn through the night. In between trips I erected a tarp above my tent, cut and

placed ridgepoles, and trenched where the rainwater was beginning to run under the shelter. I was quite wet by then but in between downbursts, was able to get half dry by the fire. The only casualty was that it was still too rainy to fry bacon and potatoes.

Fortunately, even after all the rain, I still had coals in the morning. It would have been near impossible to start a new fire otherwise. Everything except me and my gear was soaked. The side canyon roared with torrents of water in the night but there was no flash flood. The morning weather was fine too and I was finally able to cook the bacon. Potatoes, fried perfectly golden in the grease, were almost as bright as the returning sun.

Surviving the storm and having this wonderful breakfast cooked on the weathered coals was delightful. I remember being filled with peace and thinking about the fact that I was in a place called Temporal Canyon. There was some message about time perhaps and I might have wondered what I was doing with my own time except that this was obvious. I was practicing being and there I was. Accepting my peace, I spent the day working on the pipe which I'd started carving at Guajolote Flats.

The first manzanita pipe I ever made was in the early eighties. It was a treasure and I'd also made a macrame bag for it. That was one of the things taken by the federal marshals in Cochise Stronghold thirty some years earlier. They kept all the nice things like that. The second pipe was carved just two years earlier and I gave it to somebody in Mexico before crossing into Guatemala. This new pipe was the prettiest of the three. There was a certain curve to it and I spent the afternoon burning out the stem with a piece of wire cut from a fence. Despite the curve, the stem hole came out perfectly under the bowl and by then I had it sanded and oiled. All that was left to do was to break it in but I

didn't want to smoke alone. It was a pipe to share.

Just then Josh and Devin from Sierra Vista came by. I was right on the Arizona Trail and wasn't surprised to see hikers. They weren't going far but I had been up the trail already and could suggest what to see. They went on but stopped on their way back and I asked them if they were in the military, there's a big base in Sierra Vista. One of them replied, "No, but after we quit smoking, maybe..." That was enough of a hint to offer to make their day and I shared my new pipe.

Behind the storm, the night was cold but the heart of my fire was warm. As I mentioned above, this was a heart of stone and it reflected all the warmth I needed. It was a true heart fire too and there was some extra light from it, a heart of peace which inspired me to speak my own truth. I made three videos speaking directly to the heart. One was about communicating heart to heart and Kristi, the young woman from Patagonia, was the example. The next video was about the rainbow song, "We are rising up," and I explained that the phoenix in the fire was our purpose and drive. As the phoenix rises and reaches the heart, the heart spreads its wings, and when we rise higher from there we become co-creators:

We are rising up
Like a phoenix in the fire
Rise up, rise up
Spread your wings and fly higher

The third video is explained below because it came back to me the next morning and the ideas expressed in it would inform the rest of my life.

It was frigid that morning which was easily remedied with a big pot of coffee and more golden potatoes. That was my first breakfast and I made a second one of loaded pancakes an hour or so later. I also took a nice bath in the side canyon. This was the peace I was finding there, the peace I was living there. That's what time was for.

I'd thought about peace the night before and although I didn't write it down at the time, I made videos. Even now I remember the thoughts almost exactly. it was still on my mind that morning and went like this:

Suppose humankind's greatest wish, the wish of all ages, that we should have everlasting peace had been granted but that most people hadn't heard or, if they had, they didn't believe. What would that look like? How much of my own life is lived in peace?

My path was full of so much peace that I hardly noticed the extremity of my routes until I went back the other way. Here, it was ten miles of rough mountain roads to Patagonia. Just as I had when I was leaving the West Stronghold, I wondered how I'd made it up there in the first place.

In retracing my steps, I also noticed other things like that the people in Patagonia that worked so hard making ecological reserves, butterfly refuges, and community gardens were diffident. They didn't say hello to a stranger like me but walked by with a glazed look, pretending that I wasn't even there. I appreciated their service but what is service without brotherhood? It was La Grange all over again except that the rednecks of the town were all friendly, like the drunk man who

cooked me steak and he wasn't the only one.

When I mentioned to the store clerk that the town seemed kind of divided, she instantly agreed and wasn't surprised that I'd noticed. There was evidence too and she just nodded as I recounted my experiences at the food co-op and near the galleries in town. Here at the store where all the ranchers and miners go, everyone greeted me. She nodded as I laid out my case, then we laughed. I told her my fantasy from the night before too, that what if we had actually been granted peace but nobody believed it. She lit up at that and said thoughtfully, "Ninety-five percent of every day is peaceful." I'd invited her to examine her own life.

This didn't really come up but it seems that conflict results from misunderstanding and it's in misunderstandings that we would most benefit from remembering that we were granted peace. In my own experience, touching that heart of true peace was ever the answer. I left her there contemplating her own peace and rode on towards Sonoita.

On my way out of town I found the fifth pipe that I'd found on my journey. All five were exactly the same type, one hit aluminum bats that look like filtered cigarettes. This was the second one I found on that very road, the other one was on the shoulder just east of Nogales two years earlier. This one was full of fresh and potent herb though so it was the best one of all. Thank you Arizona.

The route to Sonoita was a gentle climb at the foot of the Santa Rita Mountains. I tried to remember the route from when I'd ridden it before but it was all new. I was thinking about memory and imprint and although I found the landscape quite remarkable, I seemed to have no memory of it. Where was I then? What might I have been pondering? The junction at Sonoita was

the same though, confusing although there was no reason for it to be, and I counterintuitively made the obvious left turn that kept me on my path north.

There was a border patrol checkpoint past Sonoita and I happened to meet the commander for that region. I remembered the names of most of the officers who had helped me and he knew them all. I mean, I was thanking them for helping me, for being kind. Then I mentioned the one hardass, Ferguson, and added, "Except for him." It was clear that I was joking, the man wasn't bad, he just had cop-mentality. The commander and I laughed about him anyway.

It was getting late by then so when I saw a forest service road going towards the mountain, I took it and after a few miles came to a much overused dispersed camping spot beside the road. Although the site was trashed, it was a simple matter to wheel my bike past it, cross an arroyo, and then to melt into the forest. I didn't know that it was going to be the coldest night yet but gathered a bunch of firewood, built a blaze, and made myself at home.

It was indeed very cold that night. I would have been plenty warm on the ground but the mesquite I'd found in the twilight had invited my hammock and despite using both my sleeping bags, I was cold before sunrise. Unable to sleep and shiver at the same time, I got up, built a fire, and waited for the dawn swaddled in my cloak, warming up with hot coffee. I rode on gloved into the first light of the day. It was clear except to the east where thick low clouds, looking like a wave breaking on a shore, blanketed the crest of the Whetstone Mountains. I stopped at a pullout to admire this and there found a new hat, washed and frozen white in the frost of the morning. It was another much

needed gift of the road.

It was a delicious downhill from there into Vail. I remembered that part well from riding it before and it had the same on top of the world feeling as it had the first time that I'd coasted down it. There were grand views of the Catalina Mountains and the desert below them. I could also see many of the ranges that I'd already traveled through. Mt. Graham, the Chiricahuas, Huachuca, and all the basins in between. From Vail there were twenty-four more downhill miles to Fourth Avenue and a strong tailwind to push me there.

9

With a Good Heart

Tucson held a lot of memories for me. The most relevant was that two years earlier the men on the street had given me the keys to the city. Turning the lock yet again, a batch of dirty kids who were out bumming pizza fed me. My family was everywhere and they had my back. After much laughter and even some song, I rode north on Fourth Avenue, stopped at Catalina Park, then made my way to the Oro Valley Trail. There was a spot under a bridge over a wash where the coyotes run free. I'd passed many nights there and once again made myself at home.

Although this was the same area I'd come to know so well two years earlier, this time I was overcome with memories of walking up State Highway 77 thirty-four years earlier. Maybe it was because I had just come from Cochise Stronghold where the seeds for the walk were planted. Thirty or forty of us carried the peace pole up that road while Rasta Hari played "Redemption Song" on his guitar. We all sang along. Those were the memories I rode beside, following my own footsteps through Catalina, left at Oracle Junction, and then across Cadillac Wash.

Cadillac Wash had always been a sanctuary for people like me. My first visit was on the walk to Big Mountain that I'd been thinking about all day. I'd also hitchhiked there several times and later arrived with one of the great loves of my life. As I biked past on this iteration of the journey, there was a yurt in view so I figured there was still family there but I didn't stop. My memories were enough without digging into them. It was complex, a friend had died there and I wasn't sure how much I wanted to remember. I rode on.

The desert was perfect for clearing my thoughts. The land was mostly flat and very dry with not a tree in sight. Saguaro cactus grew thickly on the few rocky protrusions which broke the plain. In the distance, three button shaped small buttes spoke to me of other memories. A friend and I had hiked there finding a rock that hummed and where human sized honeycombs hung from overhangs. This empty land through which I rode was rich like that and with my mind clear, so was the magic. Potential was everywhere and visible in a way that made the riding effortless.

Perhaps that's why the veil was so thin and looking through it I could see my own footsteps beside the road. The Tom Mix Rest Area held even closer memories as did a roadside table where I'd passed a night with coyotes visiting while I slept. At Tom Mix, a raven flew in, and perched in a tree next to the table where I rested, it told me that it remembered too. I had such a strong feeling of understanding the raven, that it was a generational and familial memory and I treasured those memories as much as the raven did but wasn't dwelling in the past. If I remember right, the raven also said, "Be here now." Of all the times I'd been on this road, this was the best time and I was present for that.

The miles rolled by as easily as the sun crossed the sky and I rode like the sun all afternoon, passing the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument and on to the Keli Akimel O'otham lands, (the Gila River Nation). There were two men on the reservation who I wish I remembered more clearly but the only note is that we became friends. They told me that once I crossed the Gila River I would find a place to camp and I ended the day rolled out on a pull off beside a canal.

Manuel Ochoa sold produce in the city and I think I came up on him as he was repairing a tire. All I have in my notes about him is his name but I remember him well. He was round like a tire and had a nature that rolled in a similar fashion. His peace was visible in that he had a good life and a great attitude despite his trouble on the road just then. I brightened his day too and he let me. This also endeared him to me. It was twenty miles from there to the edge of Phoenix and their bike trail system.

The city didn't seem real. It was clearly there but where was the real life? Everything seemed so surreal. The idea of people going from house to car and into stores without seeming to be in the real world astounded me. I realize now that this was somewhat of a judgmental perspective. I had just come from the mountains where water flowed in streams and giant puffballs grew from golf balls. It's fair to say that I wasn't in the real world either. There were people in Chaparral Park though, more people playing frisbee golf than I'd ever seen on one course. At the sight of people outside having fun, my hope was restored.

A new friend was waiting for me in Scottsdale. I was hungry for company and had made a social media post seeking family in the Phoenix area. My only response was from a rainbow sister who was stranded in a department store parking lot waiting

for car parts. She'd been stuck for two weeks and still didn't know that there was a beautiful park only three blocks away. The park was just the medicine she needed too. I mean, I had just come from there and carried a certain peace from it so it was easy to convince her to go there with me. We climbed a tree, swung from the branches, then she climbed to the highest branch. We smoked and talked for hours, hearing each other and feeling at home.

Part of the conversation was about consent and she told me about an incident at a Washington regional gathering where a man had not respected her autonomy. He badgered her, and then later, nobody would listen to her about this being a violation of consent. She was very upset that the family did not address her concerns. I cared though, and would tell her story at a council in Wisconsin the next summer.

Her dog Orion took to me and listened to everything I said except that she was secretly commanding him with hand signals from behind my back. We laughed together when she told me.

On the way back from the park she introduced me to her friend Pastor John who she called Farmer John. He was getting ready to bicycle from there to Florida and I gave him some advice, to embrace the journey mostly.

When the night fell and after sharing a meal, my new friend invited me and my bike into her broken down van. It was tight but we fit, (with Orion between us). Thank you sister.

Coffee in the morning was with her and a homeless former cop who fantasized that he was now a lawyer. She was kind of behind him and mouthed, "He's making it up." I humored him and silently laughed along with my friend.

Protected bike lanes and sidewalks brought me through the last twenty miles of the city and my mind was the same as it

had been when I rode into Phoenix the day before. People were out, but only for one of two purposes: every church parking lot was full as were all the lots at the many big brand retail outlets and I wondered what correlation there might be between those two behaviors. I thought about it in terms of the real life and for me, real life was as close as whatever lay just beyond the last bit of the city.

Sun City was that final suburb and from there it was all barren desert to the Hassayampa River. After Phoenix, saguaro studded wastelands were never so beautiful. The river itself was a linear oasis forested in mesquite and sycamore. The perfect tree for my hammock was tucked away in a back corner of a rest area built on the banks of the river. Once again, the end of my day was at another perfect place for finding peace.

Coffee and cookies in the morning, alone by a desert fire, was another certain measure of peace. I felt at home and I felt strong. The sun would soon rise and the light would fill me. This was as much of a fuel as the food I ate. Once I started riding, and this before the sun, I was stronger. Crossing so many mountains had had an effect and here I knew what had happened as soon as I felt it. I was vigorously and joyfully fit, and at sunrise, illuminated.

Someone fed me on the edge of Wickenburg, simply a breakfast sandwich at a cafe but a profound generosity. As I ate I thought about my new friend and the time we spent together. We talked for seven hours! Mostly, we were both starved for family and blessed that we got along but there was also an astrological compatibility which I examined as I ate my breakfast.

After breakfast, I met a man who wasn't there. I don't remember why I described him like that but I put him in my notes. Perhaps this placed him. Farther along was a sign warning

about the danger of drinking from the Hassayampa River. Those who do are never able to tell the truth again. An older indigenous legend says that those who drink from above the trail can then only speak the truth. I filled my water from above the highway.

A man at the info center wanted to lose weight. That was his excuse for approaching me. He buttered me up, letting me know how trim I was. Not only did I feel strong, I looked strong. He didn't look half bad himself and didn't really need to lose weight. So, instead of offering any physical exercise, I suggested he lose some mental weight and taught him about being single minded. This was how I became fit and I was still practicing all day every day although I don't remember exactly which mantra I happened to be using that day. Anyway, I told him all about it. Maybe my exposition was the truth serum effect from drinking from above the trail. My notes simply say, "Goodwill," and I think I meant that he sent me off with a heartfelt blessing.

The climb out of Wickenburg was on a bike path which ran parallel to the highway. The path was its own road and being on something like that, away from all the cars, was empowering. My effort, on my path, was all it took to get where I was going, and without traffic, I didn't have to watch my back either. This made it a lot easier to pay attention and I was stronger. Then I wondered if my heart had grown stronger too. I figured it did and thought again about meeting my friend in Scottsdale.

My next new friends were a couple from Australia who had bicycled all the way from Calgary. They told me about the campground where they'd passed the night and I told them how to find the beginning of the bike trail into Wickenburg but we quickly parted. They only had a certain amount of time on their visas. Within a few miles, here came another touring cyclist. The

man was from Maine, already knew the Canadians, and at his rate of travel would quickly catch up with them again.

The campground the Aussies had told me about sounded so good that I flew along hoping to reach it before dark. The bike trail out of Wickenburg had taken me up out of the Hassayampa Valley and past that I was in a flat desert. The Harquahala Mountains stood ahead and to the south. Past Aguila, they were parallel to the highway. In the plain between me and the mountain, a lone palm in the distance stood amid chaparral speaking of the promise of water. My jugs were full already. I still hadn't reached any campground though so when I got to Wenden, a large grove of mesquite trees between the highway and the railroad tracks looked just like home and I strung my hammock in a tree.

Tom Fremantle from England was walking along the highway the next morning. Like me, he was on a mission; his path was a walk around the world. I didn't know it then but he had at one time bicycled 12,500 miles from England to Australia. Although he was on foot and I was riding, we found ourselves alike right then and there, athletes intent on accomplishing our goals.

I asked Tom what he said when people offered him rides. He replied, "I can't accept rides," and this was in the same voice that I would hear myself use to say the same words. It was as if some other tongue, a very familiar one, spoke through us. We were the same and meeting another man who listened to whispers, a man who didn't question but rather followed, made me wonder again about the nature of the truth we moved through. This contemplation also filled me with peace and was some proof towards my hypothesis that humankind had indeed

been granted its greatest wish.

Somewhere near Granite Wash Pass, or maybe even closer to I-10 which I would have to take to get to the Colorado River, there was another touring cyclist. Matt Brooks quit his job to ride across the country and was on his way to Florida, (and not taking the long way around like I had). We smiled at our common joy and encouraged each other.

By the time I did reach the interstate, it was quite hot out. The highway rose slightly to Piomosa Pass and the downhill ride to Quartzite from there was as exquisite as the view. I could see across the La Paz Valley to the mountains past Quartzite and over them to the Colorado River which flowed below the Chocolate Mountains in California. Each mountain range was a different color.

It was only October 22nd and Quartzite was still a ghost town although the snow birds were beginning to arrive. I stopped at a cafe for WiFi and met the few transients who were also there early. My favorite was a bicyclist with a very friendly dog who had accurately useful information about the road ahead. He was family as was my least favorite new friend there. This other man asked questions but couldn't listen to any replies which made me feel disrespected. I remember saying, "Why do you ask if you're not going to listen?" It became clear though that this was because he simply could not listen. I had compassion for that.

Another full day was almost over but it wasn't dark out yet and there were only sixteen more miles to the river. I remember racing the daylight, the setting sun ahead of me drawing me on, then riding in the twilight to a rest area where I fixed my lights for the night.

The lights of Ehrenburg clustered along the interstate,

growing brighter as the night got darker and this was a dark night. The moon was waning and wouldn't rise for two more hours. Aside from the lights, the rest of the world was only a starlit hint at forms. Riding through this formlessness on a river of headlights placed me outside of place. I was there already, down at the river, and also where I'd come from. It was all light, even the dark spots, even me.

An old grizzled desert rat in Ehrenburg gave me some advice but I have no idea what he told me except that it was useful and that I followed it. I'm honoring him by mentioning it. This was at a truck stop on the south side of the interstate. From here I would ride down the Colorado River and cross into California on a wooden bridge. I was well stocked still and had no worries about setting off into the desert in the night.

It did take some few miles of stopping and checking my map to make sure I was on the right route though. This was all gravel and not signed well but there was some small amount of well lit industry which made for a fine landmark. Once I was past that, the moon rose and my route was more well defined. As soon as it got close to the river, I found a sheltered pull off and made camp. Although I'd come a long way and rode into the night, I wasn't tired yet and built a huge fire in celebration.

From there the road followed the channelized Colorado River very closely. On the Arizona side where I was, low bluffs rose into the Kofa region. Between the road and the bluff, oxbow lakes remained from the more primitive river which used to flow through there. The water in these lakes was beautiful as was the Colorado itself. It was actually a paradise and swimming in one of these oxbows was as purifying as the pond at Hostel in the Forest had been.

It wasn't the kind of paradise where everything was perfect either and I rode through a long burnt stretch where blackened dead limbs of palo verde skeletons spoke of their lives lost. That was part of the paradise as was the fact that it was a difficult gravel road, not the hardest, not after what I'd already been through, but difficult.

A difficult situation was easy if I made it easy and I'd learned that well. It was like second nature actually, and placed in the desert with a river and with sky and with the Kofa beside me, this was easy.

With all the time in the world, I stopped at another oxbow, swam, and then made pancakes. As I cooked my lunch I thought about my plans. I was on my way to Slab City to have a break from the road. I needed to be around other free people like me and I knew they were there. I didn't know how long I would stay but, as I bit into a hot fluffy bite of pancake, a vision of a free pancake kitchen came to me. It was simply an idea for how to meet my basic needs while I was there and the cakes were that good. After I ate, I walked down a wash to the Colorado River and there on the shore was a cast iron pancake griddle. It was too heavy to take on my bike but not too heavy to be a sign.

The agriculture in the Cibola area made me feel like I was in Egypt. Surely, there was no other place in the world so much like the Nile, a rich agricultural paradise lying along deep clear waters between vast deserts. Beyond that, it made me feel placed on the earth. I was on the planet, not simply in a woebegotten corner of Arizona. I knew where I was and still wanted to ride around the world.

The next other world was the land across the river and accessed by crossing a huge wooden bridge. California was as dry

as I remembered it but just across the bridge was a BLM site, the Oxbow Recreation and Wildlife Area. A maintenance worker greeted me right away and filled my jugs. The public out enjoying the site were equally friendly in greetings and camaraderie. They were the kind of people who opened up when asked how the fishing was. One of them, Jimmy, invited me over for a beer and a smoke.

Highway 78 rose gradually from the river, following the foothills of the Chocolate Mountains. Although it wasn't steep, it was a long gradual climb through bare mountains in the hot sun. Ancient mesquites growing in the arroyos below the mountain provided the only shade and this only after I reached slightly higher elevations. I rode about thirty miles over the course of the afternoon, my only break was getting off the bike to explore an attractive wash. The end of the day found me almost to Buzzard Peak and I pushed my bike far up a wash then around the curve of the terrain until I was well away from the highway.

For being in a part of the world where rain rarely falls, the mesquite I found was huge. I broke a stout branch to the correct length, leaned my bike on it, and went out to explore. I crossed the wash, climbed the bank, and ambled through the desert. In three or four different areas I found two foot deep pits, one of them freshly dug. Then I found the proximate cause, an empty but recent shell of a desert tortoise. It was large and there were still bones inside it but all the flesh was gone.

When I finally built a fire, I discovered just how ancient the mesquites in the wash were. The branches themselves were hard to break and even small ones had many rings. Ignited, it was the hottest wood I'd ever burned and I worried that the fire would burn through my pots. The coals lasted all through the night

although I fed the fire again before morning. I always woke up before the sun and shortly after I did, the moon joined me. It rose so brightly that I could see the glue on my rolling paper so I rolled a smoke then cooked breakfast. Fed on more fat pancakes, I was back on the road at first light and now with a desert tortoise shell strapped to my front basket.

The border patrol inspection station was only a mile or so down the road and they waved me right through. Six miles farther along was a historical marker for a pre-Colombian trail that went from the Colorado River to the Coachella Valley. The evidence of it was written in the pebbles of the desert which over aeons, sandaled feet had kicked from the path. I leaned my bike against something and walked a mile or so along the ancient trail listening for those old footsteps.

I might have coasted all the way to Glamis from there and remember stopping at the edge of the dunes to look south down the primitive road I took to that spot two years earlier. As before, I met several dune buggy enthusiasts at the resort in Glamis but quickly rode on. Slab City was in reach if I rode hard and the first part of that route was climbing to the top of the dunes. At thirty-five miles long and eight miles wide, these weren't the largest dunes on any continent. They were tiny compared to the Sandhills for example yet were stunningly majestic. I was taken by the austere beauty and amused at the many people out playing on them. They rode by in the distance, columns of four-wheeled ants making their way along known routes although the entire area was fair game for them to drive upon.

The west side of the dunes was much steeper than the east and I flew down into the Imperial Valley, turning north just east of Brawley towards the Salton Sink and Slab City. A tree growing

between a field and the road made for a likely rest stop and as I puffed on a cigarette in the shade of it, a long black snake with narrow white rings all along its body joined me. It was a friendly type of snake but still startled me. This was my last stop before Slab City.

10 Illimitable Heights

The guard shack at the lower canal was the first sign of Slab City. Boldly painted on its walls was the slogan, “The Last Free Place on Earth.” As I would soon discover, it wasn’t only free, it was aside from any other reality, a place where archetypes walked and where magic happens as a matter of course. I was on my way to a camp named Wanderland but found myself in Wonderland:

I didn’t fall into the rabbit hole. I jumped and was immediately in hot water. It was just before dark and I’d finally reached the hot springs at the edge of Slab City. A woman from Quebec stood naked on the ledge above the pool and smiled. Perhaps she was Alice. She waited while I leaned my bike, stripped off my clothes, and then together we dove from the ledge into the pool. The water was much hotter than I remember it ever being before and the miles that I was still wearing washed away.

Wanderland itself was wrecked though, with overturned shelves, no shade, and the remains of the desert paradise that I remembered fondly scattered and strewn across

the slab. There was a small area cleared with a couch and carpeting but there was no shelter from the sun which would again beat down in the morning.

After just a short time, before I even laid out my bags, I was found by a very drunk and hatless mad hatter. He greeted me with an aggressive, who the fuck are you hug, but seeing that the door was just my size, he welcomed me.

I dove right in. My previous visit had endeared the queen to me; my whole mission was of hearts, and I didn't at all want her to fall into an upside down rabbit hole when she returned. The disarray would have had her screaming, "Off with their heads." That was another motivation to put the court in order.

All the normally abnormal characters populated this all too real fantasy. There were teas with which to grow and pills upon which to shrink and something different in every room. The hookah smoking caterpillar also smoked dab rigs, pipes made from any and every old material, hemp paper joints, and cigar paper spliffs.

Perhaps I was the white rabbit, my watch ticking in time to the beat of my heart. My goals were solely that the Queen should arrive in her splendor, and on time. So I worked, raising her realm and restoring a route that might be followed by those on journeys of the heart.

I was on a journey of the heart and would soon discover that I didn't have to make a pancake kitchen or any other kind of enterprise to survive. The Rumours bus was there serving coffee and a meal. There were no fees and there wasn't even a donation jar. As I ate the first of many free meals there, a man came up with money in hand but Piper, the Rumours focalizer, didn't accept it right away. He had to make sure first that the donor understood

that their services were free. The money would of course be useful for their mission but Piper perfectly expressed that it was all a gift. It was only after the man clearly understood this that he would accept the money.

Another man arrived shortly after this. He was simply getting a cup of coffee but his bearing, including his smile, the few words he spoke, and the pleasure with which he received the cup of joe, all spoke of gratitude. I saw this so clearly that all of a sudden I recognized that this same spark of thankfulness was present in all the people I'd met throughout the city, a quality about them that I'd been unable to name. Much later in talking about the Mexican conception of *la gente*, I realized that the grateful man had perfectly expressed that aspect of one shared heart and my perception was in truth of *una cuerpo*, the one body.

The shell of a body was still in my front basket and several people were interested in it. One man offered a large bag of weed but he didn't have it on him so I didn't immediately accept his offer. Meanwhile, there was a brother who a few years earlier had needed rescue and I was the one who helped. When I heard that he was there, I immediately knew that the shell was for him. He was a desert tortoise himself. As I rode over to find him and share this gift, the other man drove up and by then had the marijuana with him that he wanted to trade with me. He held it up before my face and I had to refuse. The shell was by then a gift and with it I found the soul of the city.

The present souls were many and diverse. Hundreds of people lived there through the winter and thousands of others visited for the hot springs, for Salvation Mountain, and for the culture. They were out on every street, in various establishments, and loose in the desert. I quickly found my greater family at the

internet cafe, the skatepark, and at the Oasis which was right next door to Wonderland.

The city itself was about a mile from the hot springs and I would spend my days beautifying and redefining Wonderland and then would go for a soak. Every moment was extraordinary and that went double for the hot springs. I wrote about my next visit at the time:

Six actors from LA were at the hot springs pool. They were celebrating because one of the men had just landed a role playing Mick Jagger. The others were adult stars which I inferred from the way they were talking about fluffers.

One of the girls was sitting by me with our feet in the water. She said that she wasn't a very good nudist because she needed her big girl panties, which she wasn't wearing, to keep stuff from getting into her "pretty little thing" as she called it. She was telling me this to apologize for having that pretty little thing pointed at me. One of the men said that people with penises have a similar problem. That when we're sitting there naked, the penis is like an elephant trunk, picking up stuff and putting it where it doesn't belong. "Building nests," he said and added that this could lead to constipation.

We laughed. Everyone at the pool was in a bright mood from the hilarity of a woman jumping into the spring with her duck. It wasn't a rubber duck and it landed flapping and quacking. This had us all laughing and checking realities with the closest other person.

The duck swam, then nested on the chest of its person who was floating on her back. It tugged on her dreds and quacked more as they drifted. When she got out, the duck stayed in and swam around all the other bathers. The spring was hot and someone joked about the duck being half cooked so she

came back and got it out.

When it comes right down to it, the laughter at the spring was as healing as the water. Purification, laughter, purification, laughter...

Another favorite liminal space was the library and I happened to go there at the same time as a Squat the Planet convention. I didn't know they were there but had been communicating with several of the participants for most of the past two years. As part of their celebration, everyone was offered doses of LSD. I didn't take any but stayed until everyone else was tripping and ended up with quite a contact high. Later I wrote:

The doser smiled and said, "Do you want to trip?" I didn't but I was thrilled at the offer. Just being that close to it gave me a sympathetic buzz. The bartender had his hit in his mouth and later I watched his grin come on so fiercely that it made him blush bright red.

The LSD came from the Haight. The man said that it cost him a hundred fifty for the sheet and that he'd gotten the dirty kid price. The drug wasn't dirty though and the kids played, all but me and a couple other men indifferent to it. I left when their giggle factor came from some other realm that my slight contact high wasn't taking me to.

Once a psychonaut, always a psychonaut though and I rode the contact high out into the desert. I followed the canal north alongside the bombing range. I was on a barren mesa at only seventy feet above sea level and could see out across the Salton Sea to the mountains on the other side. I was amazed to have found such a broad vista at so low of an elevation.

I might have kept riding. Each turn and rise led to other views and my perspective on the basin expanded. After a couple

miles though, there was a wide sandy wash which I couldn't ride through and I turned around. I was content to go back to the moonscape, a blank canvas upon which I drew my route back into the city.

At the art colony, a canvas was almost painted and on it, a teardrop filled eyeball looked out from behind a manga warrior goddess and an extra-normal wildcat. The artist was bringing them to life with bright highlights and she was as beautiful as her artwork. The other artist was stunning too and playfully painted bright red patterns on the torso of a mannequin to which she would then attach found objects. I spotted a purple rubber brain and from my still slightly psychedelic mindset, pictured it atop the torso.

Everyone at the hot springs was on an adventure too, their conversation coming from that deep introspection of psychedelic connection. Also, the water wasn't as hot as usual but the nymphs there had me steamed. I was already aroused from watching the nakedly creative artists I'd just met manifest the beauty of their hearts into physicality. Here it was simply nakedness. Pure, beautiful, and bearing that certain altered innocence of the drug they were wearing. This was also art.

Back at camp I made supper for the mad hatter, but didn't find out until later that he'd also met the kindly smiling doser. He looked at the supper I'd prepared, this a boy who will eat anything, and instead of dishing up said, "Look at this," and pulled a large ear of Indian corn from his bag. Losing himself in the varied colors of it, he dined on that beauty and left the prepared meal untouched.

Tomes and Jessica were at the Oasis the next morning and greeted me with big smiles. Knowing how much I loved words, they'd picked up a crossword book so that when we ran into each other, we could play. Tomes and I were friends already but I was

just getting to know Jessica. As we all puzzled over the crosswords, it came out that Jessica worked at Paramount and one of my oldest friends had worked there too. That Jessica and I had a basis for friendship was a great gift to Tomes. She liked that I liked who she liked and that opened our new friendship up even more. The love was already present but here was uplifted and magnified.

Some of the characters from my story of the day before were at the library including the boy who blushed and I read him the story about tripping without LSD which I had already written by then. He was flattered and amused. There was a new person there too, a superbly beautiful young woman who was on top of the world. It was her oyster and in that moment my stories were the pearl. As she parted, she said goodbye to everyone but blew me kisses. They rained down on me and I bathed in the love.

A lurker was listening as I read my work. She was a twenty-two year old kid well seasoned to the road by solo travel in both the US and Australia. She'd hopped freights and hitchhiked in both countries. I didn't even know she was there until much later in the day, much less that she was a fan of my writing, but she'd recognized me by the voice of my stories. Later she shared her appreciation with a slug of bourbon and the tale of her own journeys.

Also present was a young woman who two years earlier had messaged me for bike touring tips. She followed my advice, got the gear I recommended, and rode around Lake Michigan with her little dog. I was her virtual mentor and this went well. We'd never met in person until then and instantly found an easy friendship. I felt loved to have been taken seriously, as one with knowledge.

Anne returned from her hike on the Pacific Crest Trail

that day too. She walked eighty kilometers but returned because the nights on the mountain were already below freezing. Her water bottles froze. This was the woman from Quebec who I met naked at the hot springs when I first arrived, the one I characterized as Alice. In remeeting her I knew she was my heart sister and felt loved in the light of continuing friendship.

Those are simply highlights of that day of abundant love. Encounters with Berl, Robert, Andrew, and others all allowed for a profound love awareness. Meeting Coywolf is worth mentioning too. He was another virtual friend, one who always let me know how much he appreciated that I shared my writing. In the love of brotherhood it was obvious why my words resonated for him, we shared the same heart. I saw myself in him and he saw himself in me.

Even simple things made me feel loved that day and the final kiss of this beauty was at the end of the day at a burn barrel. A young Asian woman approached to tell me how much she liked my shirt. It was a little nothing but the smiles were real as was the love. Love is like this. I am loved and you are too.

Along with the nudists, artists, vagabonds, and retirees living in RVs, there were lost people seeking healing. One of them looked dangerous and I wrote about him at the time:

He looked like a killer. His tattoos and silent stillness spoke of dangers faced and foes conquered. When he finally spoke, it was to his dog and he was chastising it for licking me. His voice when I heard it was as kind as his dog though and my first impression was spun a hundred and eighty degrees. It was clear to me that this was a good man.

Later I found out that the man was indeed a killer, one that didn't believe that it was right to kill anyone but he had an

ability and the propensity such that the Marines had trained him to be a sniper. He killed the enemy. First he shot the man then put a round in their eighty millimeter. Then he would call in an airstrike on the position to totally destroy the gun. He didn't say how many he'd killed. It was more than one. There were so many that it bore heavy on his soul.

It's not easy to kill. We're not made to be cogs in death machines but it was just a job. That's why he opened up. When it came out that he was a veteran I'd asked what his job was and it was to kill.

I'd met another veteran the day before, a former clerk who served in Iraq. He never saw any action but returned with post traumatic stress. This man, the sniper, returned with post trigger remorse.

I could tell by his voice and by the way he treated his dog that he would manage his remorse. That one day he would allow himself a heart filled with great compassion. He was already showing it. I thanked him for bringing good energy to the hot spring. He really cared about that. He was finding peace there as was I.

Much later, I showed him the story. He tried to read it out loud but choked up before he reached the end and finished it silently. Through his tears he gratefully said, "I didn't think anyone even saw me." I saw him, he was my brother. The next man I met didn't think he was my brother though and it astounded me so much that I wrote about him too:

He asked, "Do you even know who I am?"

I replied, "You're my brother."

He said, "No I'm not." And I had to wonder then what

species of alien he was because I knew all men were brothers.

He expected some special treatment for having made a donation but didn't understand that the artists were disassociated from their art. They didn't even sign it. Any offerings were a gift only and nobody was fawned over for it. Donations were not for the art. They can't be. It's simply an option for visitors who also want to give. When they drop a five in, they become participants.

The man, if he was one, was confused. The anarchy tattoo under his eye was inked without any comprehension that anarchy is unity.

His drunkenness didn't help but in his own way he was art too. Later I laughed at the way he took half a beer that had been sitting out since the day before and drank it despite a warning that it could be piss, spit, or paint thinner. He drank it as if it was as good as a fresh one.

With no more half empty stale beers to drink and a chastisement from one of the artists so cutting that it made him apologize for his behavior, he slunk away.

After the old biker left, a young couple arrived with their two very young boys. They were travelers and very much the antithesis of the alien who had just left. They even had cold beers which they readily shared. I wrote about their children later:

The boys were two and four, born Czechoslovakian with a French father. They were fluent in both languages and also knew some English and Spanish.

Independent little boys, they played and explored unsupervised and this at a playground with a razor sharp slide, a fifteen foot tall seesaw, and a saw bladed monkey bar set.

At one point the older boy set off with the bottom of a globe, returning after some time with it half full of palo verde seeds. Borne in the globe, these were certainly world seeds, seeds of Yggdrasil, and the worlds to come were surely beyond any imagination.

The parents knew that they had world forming offspring. They guided them but never led except when they finally reached that certain point of being overloaded with new knowledge. The boys were exhausted. We all shared lunch then and they drove off towards Mexico.

There were lots of very kind and beautiful people from all around the world and more people on their way there. One of these other people was from Poland. Ania had the great fortune to meet one of my friends up north, who knowing that I would keep her safe, directed her to me. I wrote about her visit later:

Her dream was to cross Mongolia on horseback. Ania was a fresh faced 22 year old from Poland traveling solo through California on a bicycle. A mutual friend told her about me and she rode to Slab City, arriving just before sunset.

After securing her bike, we set out on a tour of the town. Just a few blocks from camp, a large owl flew out of the night and landed on a post above our heads. It looked at us and my new friend cupped her hands together and blew a perfect owl's "whoo-whoo." She learned this in Norway where she'd lived for two winters working with horses. The owl listened to her, then flew off down the block landing again at the very top of the tallest tree.

We went to Mama D's from there. There was a fire and a meal about to be served but she couldn't eat. Her journey was fueled by eating only a raw vegan diet and the glow of such pure

repasts shone brightly from her eyes, cheeks, and spirit. I ate though, then we walked to the Range for an evening of live music and other entertainment. It was the first night that season with outside bands. Doctor Striker was particularly striking and delightfully irreverent.

There were a normal amount of psychonauts at the Range too. I complimented Pete on his performance and he said it was a surprise that they pulled it off considering that his ukulele player was maddened on mushrooms and his bass player puddled on LSD.

Later I saw my friend Alien and I told him how much I loved the vintage dancing bear shirt that he was wearing. Twenty minutes later he returned with the shirt in hand and gave it to me. I only accepted the gift when he pointed out that he was wearing a jacket that I'd found for him the day before.

Hannah gave me a beer. She was a sociologist writing about the community and when we met earlier in the day, I'd shared my perspective on things, my stories. The beer was her way of thanking me.

Ania was amused by all this, it reminded her of the magic she'd witnessed in a free community near Granada in Spain.

It was getting cold by then and Ania left with some new friends to sit by a fire. Meanwhile, I got into a deep philosophical discussion with my friend Roger. We talked about how thoughts might not be the best basis for interpreting synchronicities and we wondered how to identify phenomena which we experienced before thought. Try as we might, we couldn't get around observer bias.

Much later, I found Ania at the fire she'd gone to and guided her back to our camp.

Other people sought me out for guidance too. The very next weekend, a bassist was asked to leave the stage and came to me to ask why. We called him Kurt Cobain. I wrote:

When he asked me why they kicked him off the stage I replied, “You don’t have enough humility to play bass.” He’d come to me directly after his disgrace and knelt beside my chair to hear this. Before the song, the usual bass player, the mad hatter, had also come to me and said that he gave up the spot because Kurt had more experience.

I noticed right away during the performance that there was a problem. It was Carlos’ band. He’s an excellent guitarist with a deeply sweet voice who played the old classics which lent place for the oldtimers who came to the show just for that familiarity. Kurt was showboating which spoiled the effect.

The mad hatter was actually one of the humblest people that I’d ever met, the kind of man who despite his talent would pluck even the most boring bass line through oldie after oldie. When he broke out on a solo set though, he played deep and darkly creative riffs descriptive of his soul. He would end those sets in a shower of sweat that he wiped from his brow and flung to the floor, his head down oblivious to the transformation he’d made in the heart of his audience.

Kurt was a transformative musician too, a guitarist who’d mastered the fretboard. He was in no way humble though except for the manner in which he knelt beside me seeking my wisdom. In this I could see that he had the seed of a great future wisdom himself. It would grow and flower yet still needed the fertilizer that I was there to offer him, humility.

Having people coming to me for protection, feedback, and advice made me feel more at home than I had ever felt in a

community. These were my people and I knew this by how they accepted me. I'd been there a month by then and still had the twenty dollars in my pocket that I arrived with. I never ran out of weed, tobacco, food, or libations. It wasn't just me, everyone's needs were being met. I wrote:

My community
Beautiful young creatives
Old grumpy wise ones

It was no paradise though, not on the surface. At that level it was a war zone, and I was sandwiched between two fronts. On one side was a gunnery range blasting off rounds and even big bombs which shook the whole city. On the other side was a dab cafe where stoners hacked on harsh hits. There was a certain staccato synchrony in this. At night, autonomous squadrons of well armed drones blinked their positions but flew in silence while tweakers battled with knives in a ground battle that nobody ever won. The blood flowed that night and by dawn a life copter landed to clear the field of casualties. The coffee flowed too and old-timers carried on in peace as always but with increasing uncertainty about who would carry the torch when they're gone.

People also came for healing. When Kurt Cobain heard that I'd been struck by lightning he asked for my touch. He was suffering from something in his head and when we were finally able to get together again, I put my hands on him. I'd started visualizing this moment when he first asked me so it was no problem to step aside and let the energy flow. By the next morning it looked like it had worked. His pallor was gone and replaced by a healthy glow. He was actually completely

transformed. The dull dusty clothes that he'd been wearing were replaced with bright clean threads and the greasy tangle that had adorned his crown was now washed and combed. His gratitude was fresh too and he shared his only treasure, a crisp filtered cigarette. I smoked with him and this was a fine reward.

That was the day that I rode to Calipatria. After a dip in the hot springs I set out down a dirt road through organic lemon orchards towards the town. I was busting out of my own routines and taking a longer ride than I had in a month. I sorely needed the meditation and the solitude of a lonely road was the stage upon which my soul could sing.

It was about ten miles to the town, a pleasant ride at a perfect temperature with little traffic and no wind to speak of. Once there, I bought a beer and drank it slowly in a park at the crossroads while I watched for signs of life. There was a lot of agricultural traffic, a couple men on bicycles, and a regular trickle of people coming in and out of the hardware store next to the park. Later I would find two men with metal detectors hunting for objects at the other park but otherwise the town was still.

The main highway back to Niland had a lot of traffic though and there was only a tiny bit of a shoulder. To ride it, I needed nerves of steel. I knew my place, the track of my wheels. I knew my potential too, how I could turn or correct for the wind of a semi passing by me only two feet away going sixty-five miles per hour. There's a deep awareness in this and knowing my strength strengthened me.

When I went back past the hot springs, a dog who knew me barked from there as if to say, "Come," I obeyed. The dog greeted me again halfway from the road to the spring, barking one more time, "Hello," then turning to run beside me until I

came to a stop. My friends were there, even the duck. I had another beer with me and the pool then was the perfect peaceful place to drink it.

Freaky people, talking dogs, and a duck, I could have been in a cartoon but no, I was simply back at the Slabs and as usual, there were new people, a young man and woman from Brazil who were completely open to joy. The man jumped spinning from the slab into the pool, climbed back out, and flipped back in. While he flipped and spun his companion hung naked with her hands and feet gripping a shrub, swinging her body so her butt splashed through the water. She was fantastically beautiful and entirely nude, a nymph or sprite surely.

Amid all the play, the other bathers left, the duck waddled away, and the Brazilians and I continued becoming certain friends. Part of this ceremony was that they gave me great gifts of exquisite weed and a fine homegrown tobacco. I accepted this gracefully but said, "These are such great gifts but I have no gift to give you."

They glowed with gratitude then and replied in unison, "You gave us love."

While we shared that unity, an old woman had arrived in a very old truck. She came by us like a whisper, undressed, and slipped into the pool. The Brazilians were getting ready to leave by then and went back to their van. After some little time, and after I'd gotten dressed myself, I heard a voice from the pool, "Help." I went to help.

Mama Jeannie was a very old woman but she didn't need help to get out of the pool or to her truck. She just wanted someone to carry her things. I took the armload of clothes and walked beside her. She was buck naked, and along with her two

dogs, got in her truck to drive back to her slab just like that. After she was in and her things stowed, I went back to the pool and heard her start the truck.

The next thing I heard was her voice again, "Help." I ran and found her sprawled on the ground of the desert, her truck thirty feet ahead, stopped by the brush surrounding the spring course. She fell out as she was driving away. I called for the Brazilians and we inspected her but except for a small puncture on her arm, she was unmarked and was able to stand with assistance and then walked unaided to her truck.

She was too confused to drive though and didn't know where she was at. She was in pain too but didn't want an ambulance. When she got cold, the Brazilian woman went to get her a blanket. I helped her put her jacket on. She wanted to lay down but it hurt her to bend. That's when she asked for an ambulance. Nobody had a phone though and I had to run to the nearest camp to have the call made.

Meanwhile a man came to the pool and while he bathed, he loudly ranted and raved about the camp nearest the spring, that they were too close and their generator too loud. His temper was so sour that the water couldn't even wash it away and it spread, irritating the man who I had asked to call the ambulance. That man started yelling at me for not being at the road to direct the ambulance in. I ignored him as I was the only one keeping an eye on Jeannie and I directed the emergency vehicles in by flashlight when they arrived.

Jeannie finally had the help she needed. The only loose thread was her two dogs and for this I had no solution. With magic loose though, and this was the Slabs so there was magic, it was no surprise that the village dog woman appeared out of the night,

(And there was in fact a village dog woman). I explained all that had happened and she left to get someone who knew and could care for the two animals. My work was done then and I rode home in the starlight.

The next time I went to the springs I found a beautiful musician there who yodeled like a cowboy. He was sitting on a milk crate playing a steel guitar, singing songs from a time long gone. He was as naked as his audience, five or six of us who had all just bathed in the spring and were air drying. There was an older man golden from head to toe, a 27 year old woman equally bronzed, another old man who had a rear view mirror from a car that he was using to shave, the sniper was there, a young hairless man, and me. Nearby were three people outside of a van. Shiv, a young blue eyed woman from Britain was juggling while her two friends drank beer.

The mountains around us were clear and bright with the light of the late afternoon sun illuminating their slopes. The Salton Sea was hazy, flooded with the moisture from the two days of rain that had scrubbed the desert all around it. The music amid this setting and with friends naturally baring it all in perfect trust was transformative. I wasn't the only one in a reverie.

A couple came up in the middle of this and sat down. The licking dog, Big Boy, went and licked them while the man prepared to bathe. He got in and then stayed in the pool until after the guitarist finished his set. As the man got back out of the pool, he stopped in pain and said his shoulder had just popped and it hurt. His partner and I watched a bruise spread on the inside of his bicep. He managed to get out of the pool but couldn't raise his forearm. I offered to help.

In my offering to help, his partner remembered me. I'd

touched her when I first got to the Slabs six weeks earlier and that touch had made a huge difference for her. With that legitimacy I put my hands on him and could feel the problem right away. I knew just where to place my fingers and knew the pressure to use, very slight. I touched him like that and while I worked, I looked across the basin to the distant mountains, opening to the reverie. As I allowed for that peace, my hands gently, ever so gently, manipulated and facilitated a flow which made the tight rounded boulder of his back soften and relax.

There was a crisis of tension in him but it couldn't hold under the gentle persuasion of this touch. It was touch and a deep power that flowed through me. I wondered if it was from the way I looked off, that gaze as serene as the one I'd just experienced in the reverie of old country songs. I felt the transfer. I saw the effects. I knew when to stop too and at that his pain was gone. It wasn't a miracle. It was trust. It was lightning. It was an expression of serenity. My work was done then and I rode on.

Every day brought more new people and the next couple were experiencing their first Thanksgiving. They knew what a feast was already though and dished up along with everyone else. Emma and Josh were from near Alice Springs, Australia and had spent the past few months exploring the West Coast. They stayed for some time in Seattle, met anarchists advocating universal gun ownership in Eugene, and were amazed to find such a peaceful commune here in the most lawless community in America.

Karl was from Quebec, from far out east on the Gaspé peninsula. He was amazed that I'd been to Baie-Comeau, a St. Lawrence River town far north and east from Montreal and Quebec City. We were certain friends simply because I knew his country. He worked the orchards in British Columbia each year,

then took a job trimming weed in Mendocino until that harvest was also done. With our friendship, I had free weed for the rest of my stay.

Max was the next international traveler and was from Germany. A young man, he displayed symptoms of anti babylonian personality disorder and took to the road on a bicycle to clear his head. A maddening money oriented quest for normality had driven him crazy but the road soothed him and led him to me. I offered him a couch for the night which quickly turned into a psychoanalytic couch upon which he unburdened himself. He was fine, then better, nourished with a gift of grace. I accepted him as he was although together we would later both find ourselves changed.

When I next saw Max he was running and I saw the uberman. His energy was strong and beautiful but he was outside himself, manifesting an idea of perfection imposed by the cultural mythology of his nation. He had no idea that this archetype was controlling him but it was all too obvious to me. A thought came, "Sublimate the uberman," and with this I saw that the perfect expression of this uberness could only be found in harmony with the underman. Humility was the key.

Later, I shared my perception with him and he had to admit that it was true. He confessed to being driven by this idea, that unconsciously he was striving to express the perfect human so deeply ingrained in his cultural identity. I compared this to the archetypal expression that I found as Peaceful Valley Walker. My choice, and it was a deliberate choice even if I was born with the potential, was relatively in-formed. There's not as much cultural knowledge of my type either, the peace ambassador, so to some extent I was able to form the archetype. His expression though

was pre-formed, not in-formed, and so strong that he lost himself in it. I invited him to consider what his expression would look like if he took charge of it and proposed that his uberness might well require this humility.

Humility was a quality which I hardly understood myself despite all the practice I had with it. It was a letting go of a need to know - in favor of simply being. It was not a static, disempowered state. I was still finding light and new ways of thinking about things, paying attention to all presence. The next time I was at the springs I had them all to myself and experienced a certain unity with the waters. I wrote:

The boundary between the top of the pool and the lithium charged air was electric. I half floated, my feet lightly touching the clay bottom of the pool while my body held an effortless chi kung standing meditation pose. My arms were before me, palms down at the very surface of the water. I felt a healing potential in that plane and conscious of the perception altering qualities of the charged vapors, allowed a unity of my intent with this effect. I charged the water then that all beings in or who would subsequently enter the pool be healed. The gases rose and my prayer spread with them. I felt the heart of the earth in this. It breathed healing through the spring. To the normal eye, nothing was to be seen. Within the eye of the heart, the world blossomed.

The seasons were passing and before I knew it, it was the Winter Solstice. A church group from one of the surrounding towns came out to feed us and I wrote about the meal later:

I wanted a cook off between all the religions so I could see whose God inspired the best cooking. The white bread Christians serving a bland meal of plain turkey, a hard roll, and cold canned vegetables would certainly lose. It was one of the top five worst free meals that I ever ate and they were trying to sell a religion with this! I wished for a Krishna temple feed then, sugared cream of wheat would have won the day but Jesus was the only game in town.

They wanted converts to step forward but nobody kneeled. We would have licked their boots for a slice of cherry pie though. It was bad marketing through and through.

They were serving this poor excuse of a meal on the solstice while repeating, "Jesus is the reason for the season." This did not go over the heads of the many people there, a high percentage of whom lived outside in tune with the seasons. We'd celebrated this day since long before the birth of that deity and the low winter sun was right there to share the truth of the reason for the season.

I'd talked about Truth with the members of the street ministry who were serving the meal. They were sincere and believed but it simply was not evident in either the food or their slogans. Truth was something that they expected to receive when they died. The people they served wanted Truth now. Their stomachs wanted Truth.

A couple of days later I found myself in a conversation about Xipolite, Mexico. I stayed on the beach there at the campground of Felipe, a French-Canadian who rented out campsites for twenty pesos a night, one dollar. There was a cold shower, a bar, guests from all over the world, and a string of shaded hammocks where travelers swung side by side through the hot part of the day. As I talked about the memory a vision came to

me of a row of hammocks in the Slabs, a place where we could chill suspended above it all but I didn't think that it was possible there. There were hardly any trees and who would have that many hammocks?

Nobody was around at Skatepark later and I rode down into the old pool, wishing that I had a BMX so I could take the jump. This was an olympic sized pool and in its depths one was immersed in psychedelic representations of visioned life. Aside from the graffiti, the only other view was of the sky. It was a dip in a psychedelic pool. When I climbed back out of the pool, I noticed that my tire was low and stopped to air it up. As soon as I stopped, the skateparkers came out of their dens. They'd been watching me and offered a pipe. After a few puffs, Val smiled and said, "We've been wondering when you were going to ride down there."

I returned his smile and with a twinkle in my eye replied, "I'm bikecore." That's when I saw my vision from earlier come to life. Looking over Val's shoulder, there was a new row of hammocks strung side by side between old concrete tank stands. As I reclined in one, I was back in Mexico and could almost hear the surf. This astounded me. I saw this in my mind's eye and within hours there I was.

Wanting to pick up some cookies for the Christmas potluck the following day I rode down to Niland. This was the nearest village and had a store, a gas station, and a post office. Although it was only three miles, I always made it into an expedition and once I arrived, would buy a beer and take it to a shady bus stop. It was my homebum palace and a fine place to drink a beer and write.

As I sat there, an old Hispanic man walked by carrying a full bag of something. When he smiled at me I wished him Merry

Christmas and at that he opened the bag and gave me tamales. Tamales have always been significant to my journey and the gift fell on me like it was the most perfect expression of Christmas spirit ever. This really warmed me and I wished that everyone I knew would be so blessed.

Water was a blessing too and a man came into camp asking for some. I'd just met him that morning and he was feral like me but in more of a pirate type of way. We'd become friends for sure, particularly when he saw that I could ride his unicycle. I also knew his mother and that made us family. All of this also made it fair to challenge him and I said, "You're out in the desert and you don't have water?"

He replied, "I'm drunk and dehydrated." He didn't smell drunk though, he smelled like adrenalin and explained that he'd just ran from the neighbor's camp after failing to steal their pirate flag. The neighbor caught him at it and threatened to shoot him.

I was about to get him a drink as he was telling me this but the telling was telling, he was still in the battle, and my campmates had arrived. We had a policy on this so I said, "This is a peace and healing camp. You can't be here with that antagonism," and together, we ordered him out. He looked at me and it was clear that he was going to respect the friendship we'd found earlier in the day. He calmed down and left peaceably. I said, "Love you brother," as he made for the fence.

His friends met him in the road and stirred him back up though. The men were all enraged, pissed off that they'd been threatened with gunfire. They ran back towards the neighbor still determined to take the flag but on their way, they jumped our fence and cut through our slab. We couldn't allow that.

Max got there first. He was untested in combat but unlike

the trespassers, he was sober, tall, and confident. He hopped the other fence and firmly told them, "No." They yelled at him but he stood strong. My drunk unicycling friend threatened him saying, "Big guys fall hard," and I suspected that Max would lose the fight if it came to that. The drunk didn't know this though and belligerently backed off. He was present enough to know that he didn't need a second battle just then.

There were about nine of them and once we stopped them, they started arguing among themselves. Some of them didn't mind two battles at once and they were yelling at us. The others were saying, "It's their slab." They were divided like that and it wasn't clear how it was going to work out. These pirates weren't alone though and just then the rest of their tribe came up, all of the women.

The grapevine was rapid in the Slabs and when the partners of all the warriors heard what was going on, they came running with their voices raised. They wanted their men to chill out. They were barely heard but this lack of unity was another weakness. By then, there were three of us ready to protect our space, the German, a small gay man armed with a wooden sword which he was a master of, and me. We were more than a match for the split eight.

We had their respect by then too and stood together until they dispersed. Their battle wasn't with us. We were all warriors in this settlement, even our enemies, and we were also brothers.

Although I was as much of a warrior as anyone, there was an upcoming battle that I didn't want to face, New Years Eve. I'm not much of a partier and the mood was that everyone would be tripping and drinking. I liked both things. Psychedelics were great but I liked them in nature, not as a party drug. I liked drinking too

but only in moderation and never to get drunk. So instead of putting up with an entire inebriated city, I decided to take a little expedition and ride around the Salton Sea.

Bombay Beach was my first stop and a lot like Slab City, desolate in a similar blasted by the desert kind of way. It was very different though, the people who lived there mostly dwelled in traditional homes with all the utilities which were absent in the Slabs. I wove through the town making my way to the sea. The odor wasn't too horrible despite dead fish floating in the shallow water near the shore. Old machinery was converted into artwork and someone had made a fantastical ship out of these parts along with old pallets and other scrounged materials. I boarded the ship and accepted my own pirate-like nature.

My first new pirate friend on the road was from Latvia and was bicycling to Slab City after a season spent trimming marijuana in Northern California. We met just past Bombay Beach where the highway ran a lot closer to the shore. The man was stocky with a round face, had a bushy beard, and wore dreadlocks which grew thickly from a pronounced receding hairline. We met on the road right next to a parking area and both stopped. I had tobacco and no papers. He had papers but no tobacco. We pooled our resources and smoked together.

The man had hopped freights in Norway, hitchhiked and bicycled all through Europe, and even traveled to the Beneficia community near Grenada, Spain that my friend Ania had told me about. He'd camped the previous night in an orange orchard and the fruit was ripe. He shared the oranges he'd picked and I in turn offered bagels with peanut butter.

We wished that we could drink together too, the brotherhood was that true, but we were far from any

conveniences. Our conversation flowed as easily as beer from the tap though and we talked for an hour feeling like we could easily travel together except that we were going opposite directions. Obeying the call of the road then, we remounted and went our separate ways.

Farther down the road I stopped at a picnic area for another rest. A little boy came by with his family then, he was maybe five, and I heard him whisper to his mother, "Is he a pirate?"

She replied, "No." I mean, I might have the face for it but I was dressed in black slacks, a brightly patterned sweater, and my expedition hat. I wasn't wearing a cutlass or any other pirate-like accessories so no was a reasonable answer.

I wasn't sure that I'd heard the boy correctly though and asked, "Did he just ask you if I was a pirate?"

"Yes."

Looking in the eyes of the little boy I said, "Aye my boy. I indeed be a pirate. Come with me and we'll sail the seven seas."

The mother gripped his small hand a little tighter at that, acknowledging my humor with a polite smile, but hurriedly whisking the boy away.

My way continued to follow the shore to the top of the lake where I found myself in an agricultural paradise. There were vast irrigated orchards of citrus and palms stretching from the edges of the lake clear up to Palm Springs. I don't remember stopping anywhere in that stretch but I do recall being astounded by the contrast from the bare desert which I'd just ridden through. After finding my intersection and turning south, I was quickly back in that more arid land and didn't go much farther. Above Desert Shores, I found a nook amid shrubs and made my

camp.

At Salton City the next morning I met a man standing outside the doors of a very busy gas station asking for handouts. He had three different lines: "Spare any change?" "I just need a quarter," and "Brother can you spare a dollar?" Watching, I observed that he had better luck asking for dollars than for coins. He told the people who didn't give, "Merry Christmas," but it was New Years Eve. He was wearing an Obama hat too and we were well into the first Trump administration by then. Maybe he was always behind the times.

I wasn't there asking for anything and spent my last two dollars on a cup of coffee. All I needed money for was to feed my vices and being broke is a great opportunity to release attachment to them. I had one cigarette and might have liked a beer. I was happy though and counted my blessings. I had warm enough clothes and a raincoat on a cold rainy day and that was enough. When there was a break in the storm, I rode on into a light drizzle.

When it started raining harder, I looked for shelter. There were lots of bridges crossing all the washes flowing out of the desert and I took a side lane to get under one of them. As I plowed into what looked like sand at a crossing of a smaller drainage, I found out that it was actually very greasy mud and my bike went down.

There's a word for this particular type of mud, sabkha, and I picked my bike up caked with the stuff even as more of it packed itself under the fenders. I kept going and pushed the rest of the way across. To make matters worse, there was no way to get under that bridge so I had to turn around and wrestle my bike back through the crossing, aiming for a pothole where I could start rinsing the worst of it off.

That was actually the end of the heavier rain and I wished that I'd just kept going. My bike was unbalanced from the mud, at least that's what I thought was causing a small instability. The solution was at hand though, a rumble strip at the edge of the traffic lane. The road was very busy so I had to wait for gaps in the traffic to aim for it. These rumbles were deep cuts in the pavement and each depression was filled with fresh rainwater. The vibration and the splash knocked some of the sabkha off but not all of it and I had to fight that mud the rest of the day.

Despite the fact that it never totally stopped raining, this desert was so arid that the mud was already drying on my bike. At the few places I stopped, I scraped off what I could, and after it was hard enough to fall, I would kick the fenders as I rode along.

Although this sounds a lot like suffering and struggle, I was in paradise eating medjool dates that I picked from a grove of palms that I'd also raided two years earlier. There I was, riding along against the wind in the rain, kicking the drying mud from my fenders, and eating dates. I was still counting my blessings too.

As soon as I could I turned off from the route I'd taken in 2016 and aimed for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge. This south end of the lake was as agricultural as the north had been so I was riding through fields and was again astounded by the contrast with the austerity of the desert.

A picnic shelter at the refuge was my refuge that night. It was really cold though and there wasn't anywhere to build a fire but I built one anyway. I scraped the duff off the ground next to the shelter slab, carefully piling it so I could restore the site before I left. Then I dug a shallow pit in which to build a twig fire. This was all arranged so I could quickly bury the fire and naturalize the spot. Nobody came by until in the morning and when they did, my

strategy worked perfectly. It took thirty seconds or less to bury and disappear the evidence. By then I'd already warmed up, cooked breakfast, and made coffee, all burning small twigs. I rode on into a bright and sunny new year.

My last stop before returning to the Slabs was at Red Island Volcano. This is the only active volcano in southern California and I was fascinated that the summit of it was below sea level at negative 137 feet. It stood above the Salton Sea and an expansive view had me thinking that I was looking at everything from beneath. I could have been on a journey to the center of the earth.

Slab City, at 144 feet, was decidedly above sea level and by the afternoon of New Year's Day had started to recover its equilibrium. The celebrations hadn't resulted in any more lifeflights or any other casualties and it was as much like home as it had been three days earlier when I left. I was different though, I'd just circled an entire sea, one which lay below sea level and in some real way I'd been in the underworld.

Rising back into the real world, I came upon a woman berating a man. She was upset because he spoke about things that he had no standing upon which to speak. Her story was about the pain of assault and abuse and she was currently outraged that this *man* was opinionated about the subject. Her indignance came from a deep place of knowing just what suffering truly was and she spoke from the heart of that pain.

She was in her mid twenties and intense. Most people couldn't handle her and the man who had claimed to understand was demolished after she lit into him. She knew I understood right away though. I mean, I didn't have to give her my credentials but I could speak on the topic and my measured words

brought her back to peace. In fact, I had at one time worked in a domestic abuse shelter and understood her situation all too well. We were also both from South Dakota and this gave us a basis for friendship.

Anyway, we continued to talk and mostly about who should speak when it came to certain topics. Neither of us had any patience for people, who obviously out of their league, acted like experts. We saw that as the hallmark of opinionation. That's the kind of nation that results when people who know nothing think they know everything and it's the worst stupidity. Better to listen and learn or try to be still and feel. We looked for solutions like that.

Later I met a man who asked, "What do you do for money?" and I didn't know how to answer. I mean, if I do something for you, it's a service. It's *for* you. Or if I do something for God, it's *for* Him. But to do something *for* money? How do you serve money? Doesn't it become a god from that perspective?

Unfortunately, it's all too common that we do things *for* money and it does become a lower case god then. Unlike real deities which shower blessings in perpetual abundance, money always asks for more and never returns enough. It's an unequal exchange and takes the gift out of the giving. The service is also for naught. As we well know, money always runs out.

Ultimately, I was unable to answer the man's question. It came from a different worldview and I had no answer. He tried to clarify, saying that he meant if I needed something from a store for example. In fact though, all the things I might have bought were consistently given outside of any type of commerce. My days were filled with offerings of encouragement, expressions of kindness, and wisdom shared. My support flowed from the same

well from which I drank and this filled me completely.

In thinking about the contrast of our separate perspectives, it came to me that the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil was mentality and that this was a poor substitute for an experiential heart based realization of unity. I'm not sure what the connection was from the encounter to the thought but I knew where I wanted to reside and that was in unity, the source of all blessings.

Despite all the people I knew and loved, my unity was also in solitude and although I wasn't leaving the city, I packed up and made the leap to live from my bike again. My first night back on wheels was spent visiting a far flung camp down on the lower canal. These were the DPK kids, two bus loads of young visionaries and that night they were gathered around a big fire. After a delicious supper, several tasteful spliffs, and the delight of family time, I rode to a large palo verde tree that stood alone beside the road. Here was my solitude, at least for the night.

Like a raucous bird in the morning a young woman camped across the road greeted the sun loudly, singing a less than perfect version of Michael Jackson's song "Beat It" at the top of her lungs. Despite this, it was quieter than up in the city and I'd slept peacefully in these suburbs. A fire and coffee, along with this unusual serenade, made the morning almost perfect. While I drank my second cup of joe, Jinx came past on her way to the hot springs offering a pipe and we smoked together. She went on to her bath saying as she left, "Keep being beautiful." Now the morning was entirely perfect.

With this delightful blessing, I was at peace and after a hearty breakfast broke camp. There were second and third coffees at the Rumours bus and then at the DPK camp. As soon as I sat

down at DPK, someone handed me a joint and warmly said, "It's all yours." That's how much they made me feel at home and this relationship would continue well beyond Slab City.

After my smoke I continued on my mission. There was mail waiting for me in Niland. Part of my pennilessness at that point was that my bank had switched over to a new card carrier and for most of the previous two months I'd had no access to my bank account. Not that there was ever much money there but my friends did regularly donate chump change.

With some small amount of money in my pocket, I bought tobacco and a beer then went to my homebum palace of a bus stop to smoke, drink, and watch the town. There was a dirty kid couple nearby and I watched them collect butts except that they didn't have any papers for the rerolling. They asked the right person when they asked me though and I added in a very generous gift of fresh tobacco too.

In California at that time, tobacco was almost as precious as weed and I saw the truth of this again when in response to my gift, the man got out a container of fine buds and put some in my pouch. Then he got out another container which had ground weed in it and told me to roll joints. I rolled. A cop pulled up beside us right then, smiling and waving though. He didn't even roll down his window. I kept rolling the joints. The officer left and by then I had three joints twisted. I only knew they were mine when the man said, "Now roll one more for us to smoke." The young couple were just that grateful for my small kindness.

The day went on like that with lots of generosity, several warm moments, and heart family. This was like so many other ordinary days out there. People were outside, they greeted each other in passing, and very often stopped simply to pass the time of

day. This was a vital community.

The stars called me again that night and by their light I made it down the dirt tracks to somewhere near Carhenge, finding yet another nook amid shrubbery.

Slabstories: True tales from the heart of Slab City was ready by then. It was more of a zine than a book, a collection of the stories told above but in a much more primitive version. I'd been able to format it into a printable document on a borrowed computer and it was ready. The stories still had a certain roughness about them but this somehow perfectly reflected the rawness of life at the Slabs. Despite its flaws, I was going to publish it.

DPK was along the first of the backroads into town and after coffee there, I rode on through citrus orchards towards Brawley. There must have been a ride offer because I noted that I had to do this on my own power and I remember wanting the publication to have this additional layer of meaning.

There was a dirty kid couple flying a sign at a store in Brawley. They were carrying a lot of instruments and full packs, both of which made them look like family even from a distance. They'd had some bad luck on a train and had to walk out of the desert so were looking particularly beat. The woman knew my friend Sequoia, which was also her name. I gave them tobacco and we smoked one of the joints from the gift of the previous day.

On my way to the printers from there, I saw a man pushing a three wheel bike and talking to the air. I also knew him; it was Serge and he was tripping. He showed me his sunglasses which were new and still adorned with their tag which said, "Serge." Finding someone to show this to simply tickled him. We laughed together that he'd found the right glasses.

The printers were very helpful and my booklet came out

better than I expected. It was getting late in the afternoon by then though and I still had twenty-five miles to ride back to the slabs. I had all my camping gear with me but wanted to get back. Reaching Kalipatria at full dark, I bought a beer to fortify myself for the last fifteen miles and sat down with it across from a donut shop where a woman was sitting with many bags and writing in a notebook. People gave her money and this was really beautiful.

That was when I moved way out into the desert, to the far edges of the city. Solitude called and I found a tree in the middle of a broad wash. It was a small shade oasis and I built an ark out of it with a prow which cut through the sand and carried me up the wash towards the city and the Chocolate Mountains. At the first port, I met a young couple, him from Kentucky and her from Morelos. She was a stage director in Mexico and worked at the famous Milan theater in the capitol. They moved in near me and my fire became the kitchen and my foredeck the dance floor. We cooked together, put the Cat Empire on Bluetooth, and danced. We ate and danced for four days while they developed their own camp farther down the wash. After they left I had other company and wrote about them at the time:

My next visitor was slight and silent. She approached my camp and slipped onto the foredeck from the portside then stopped. I was listening to a loud radio and frying chicken on a big fire. The scent had brought her and her body language politely asked me to share.

After turning the chicken, I rose and took a step towards her. She took a step back. She was only about ten feet away and kept that distance as I took another step. I didn't speak to her. I didn't know what language she spoke. I sang along with the song on the radio. It was a tune harmonious with

my voice and communicated well the peaceful feeling I was experiencing there on my vessel.

She didn't stay though. As I sang and stepped closer, she walked slowly to the starboard exit and left the ship. She continued to match me step for step and I joined her on the surface of the sandy sea. We walked on that water in this manner to the other side of the wash. Reaching shore, she became a fox again and back in that mind was startled, then ran off beyond the brush.

My new camp wasn't close to anything but the closest familiar features were the hot springs which were due north across the desert, and the DPK camp which was downstream from where I was on the wash. My hammock was strung in the branches of a huge mesquite and I very much made myself at home there. There was a bend in the trunk which made a natural shelf for my pantry and by roaming the wash I was able to find as much firewood as needed to cook my meals and warm the night. I continued to be warmed by the love of friendship too and wrote about my friend Orlando later:

He was born in Ethiopia and I'd met him four years earlier in North Carolina when he'd attacked Pentacle with his knee length dreadlocks, that soft bludgeoning as lovingly inflicted as the kind moment we were sharing there at the hot springs. He had a malt and I had an IPA. We toasted and drank beer together.

A woman came up then. She was completely naked but unashamed, natural. She had a bottle of cheap vodka but not the cheapest vodka. She liked us both, the Ethiopian and me. I wanted to wrestle her. She was a bicyclist as was I and we had all the same muscles. We laughed about that. She handed me the

bottle for another swig and said, "I like you," and who wouldn't like anyone glowing in the friendship of Orlando.

That was the Ethiopian's name, Orlando, and he was known for his high fives. He was notorious for channeling all of his chi into the slap and would leave the other palm red and stinging. I met him in that and our contact was like galaxies colliding. I felt his universe and he felt mine. The pain lingered for a mere fifteen minutes but the brotherhood was forever.

On another day, I met Orlando while he was walking with our friend Johnny. I'd never noticed how short he was before but it was obvious then because of the height of his friend who was very tall. Before that, I saw him as illimitable, Orlando might have been as tall as a skyscraper. The dots tattooed up his nose and forehead added to that impression of a connection to higher realms.

They were walking to town together and I was returning on my bike. I stopped where we met and asked, "Would you brothers like to smoke with me?" and they crossed the road while I rolled three cigarettes. As I handed them their smokes I said, "I never noticed it before but you are both vertically challenged." I added that I was obviously the median and from that height we laughed together.

Now that I had my book, I was sharing the stories with the characters which populated them and reading excerpts where it was relevant. The story about the sniper brought tears to the eyes of a group of veterans. None of them had such moral consequences from their service as this man had but even from the story, they accepted that it could as easily have been them. They cried. Later, I met another kind of warrior:

Her left forearm was mangled. A third of the flesh was gone along with part of the heel of her hand. Nobody had noticed. She got in and out of the hot spring naked but the only thing anyone saw were two, foot-long by three inch wide scars on the outside of her thigh. Someone, a snaggle toothed juggalo, finally asked her about the scars and it was only then that her tragedy became visible. The skin of her thigh was transplanted over what remained of her arm.

The juggalos next question was what had happened and her reply was in one word, "Grenade." She clarified herself into the stunned silence adding, "Police grenade." Then completed the story in three more words, "Demonstration. Standing Rock."

I knew her story. In the videos she looks like a warrior. She is a warrior. But there at the springs she was tender. She repeatedly got in and out of the pool. She sunk down in the mud and let it embrace her. She was equally caressed by the sun as she bathed naked in its light.

I thanked her. She'd suffered so deeply for clean water, that we could have clean water. She'd suffered for the prayer, for unity, for the generations. I was humbled to be in the presence of a true hero. I was humbled to see her healing, to see her whole.

There was a three part message waiting for me when I returned to my camp. I found the cigarette first. It was a crisp filtered Marlboro left like an offering on the front ledge of my firepit. Someone had come by while I was out and honored me with a gift. I silently thanked them and smoked.

The rest of the message didn't come to light until the next morning when the rising sun revealed a large inscription carved in the hard sand of the wash at the edge of my camp. It said in large letters, "I'm watching you. Time to play." This message was

centered in three lines and crowned with a third eye, an illuminated pyramid, the all seeing eye, and above that was scratched a tall cross like the one on Salvation Mountain which I could see in the distance. There was also a symbol carved by the text almost as a signature; it looked like the sign for Pisces or Cancer.

Later in the day I found the third part. It said, "I see you!" and was plowed deep into the softer sand of the wash on the other side of my camp.

Although the messages were kind of creepy, the gift made it clear that it was all in fun and although I didn't know who'd done it, I suspected someone. When I did finally see him, he couldn't lie and he was also the only one with Marlboros. Actually, his integrity was flawless. There was no threat, only play. We smoked together then, the glow of our cigarettes as bright as our friendship.

My other friends were still up on the hill and I wasn't ignoring them. I went to the Oasis and all my other old haunts at least every couple of days. At one of these places, I came upon a friend who was in need of some love and with love came laughter. I wrote about it at the time:

He'd been working on her old truck for a week. The turn signal mechanism in the steering column was melted. He told her what parts to get but she argued and resisted as if he could wave a wand and fix it for free. She finally bought the part then dogged him to fix it. I arrived just as he was finishing the job.

Seeing that he was almost done, I waited. He didn't say a word when he finished and stormed away to his trailer. I gave him a few minutes to decompress then followed. I asked him if

he was going to go to the Range and that was the trigger he needed. He unloaded.

He poured out his frustration at all the irritations that he was drowning in. He felt inflamed and even more angry because he knew his response would drive any comfort away. I said, "You're not driving me away, I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere. I'd rather be here than anywhere right now."

He bitched more. He went into the details of the offensive behavior dumped on him. I listened. I reminded him that on the scale of personal integrity, he had high marks. He deserved respect. He knew I spoke the truth and his temper evened.

We covered even more ground. We'd both been affected by the actions of another person, who sorry now for the insults he'd spewed, was begging forgiveness. We talked about how we didn't have to give him that peace. We'd already demonstrated extreme restraint by not retaliating at the time of the offense. We instead allowed him to swim in his own shit and were in no way ready yet to toss him a tube.

The common grievance that we shared brought my friend's temper much closer to mine. I was full of love that day too and his temper couldn't hold. After about twenty-five minutes of this brotherhood, he laughed. This took him by surprise and he all of a sudden became aware that he'd let go of the anger; he'd thought it would last forever. With this awareness he said, "Thank you. Here I am laughing now. Thank you."

It was soon after that, maybe the next day, when the sandstorm hit. A high wind roared over the Chocolate Mountains picking up every bit of the surface of the desert which it could. This wind had a certain solidity to it and it sandblasted my tarp

which I'd by then strung as a windblock. The air was so thick with sand that the desert looked like it was covered in a thick fog. I stuck to my shelter until it ended; there were books to read, but as soon as the dust settled, I rode into town. There was love waiting for me there and later I wrote:

She gave me a Valentine but I doubt that she'll remember. As a matter of fact, it was only January 22 but love can make any day a holiday and this gift certainly had that effect on me.

She thought that she was in Arizona. She said, "It looks like Arizona." She didn't know how she got there either except that it had been out of a fierce sandstorm, a blow so thick that it looked like fog. She said, "It has to be Arizona. A tumbleweed blew by."

She'd walked blindly through the storm because she needed a drink and fortune had dropped her penniless at a small grocery. Someone gave her enough for a beer which she quickly downed to wash the desert out of her throat. In spanging for another, or preferably for a pint of liquor, she asked the wrong person and was banished from the store. That's when I found her.

She wasn't completely befuddled but didn't know where she was or where she'd come from. On the other hand, she was totally existential. I could tell from what she told me about hopping freights and her life on the road that place had no meaning to her. She also had her gear with her. Well, someone had stolen her normal gear but she had a sleeping bag and a day pack of necessities. She would have been fine anywhere.

She had directions back to where she'd come from written on her arm. The note said, "Left, red tent," but she had

no idea how to get there.

At my concern, she explained the root cause of her problem. She had a condition resulting from a head injury. The condition was her nickname, Amnesia.

I asked her more about where she'd come from that morning figuring that she must have come from Slab City but she pointed the other way up the highway. All she remembered was that there was a group of tents. Then she added, "By the rock stacks," and I knew immediately which camp it was. There was an Inuit man camped there who'd lifted the local rock people to their feet. One of them had surely come with her for her to have made it through the storm.

While we talked, she asked people for change and earned enough for her liquor. I was her good luck and everyone she asked gave her money. She wanted me to drink with her but after making sure that she knew how to get back, I went my own way, my Valentine in hand.

My next new friend had a unique perspective on brotherhood. He had never experienced it until recently although he'd seen it in the distance all of his life.

Chris was born and raised female and told me about the great competition, that every woman was pitted against each other, and although he was a cute girl at that time, he was normal looking and could never live up to *Cosmopolitan* standards - that's the way he put it. He went on to talk about makeup and modifications women would make to be the prettiest of all.

"Mirror mirror on the wall," he said to himself in realization that this wasn't his battle and he began hormone treatments. At the time I met him he was pre-operative but presented as a man. He was slight with wispy facial hair and

people took him as gay, an effeminate gay man.

Then he told me what it was like for him the first time he found himself in a circle of men as a man. Like I said, he presented as gay but that wasn't an issue and didn't at all interfere with his acceptance by the group. He was just one of the guys and he had never felt that way when he was in a group of women. He pretty well glowed as he told me about this. It was that much of a contrast with his *Cosmopolitan* upbringing. For that matter, our companionship there, as brothers, was what had gotten him thinking about this at all. He was my brother and it was really simple like that. It was brotherhood.

There was more brotherhood out by the tanks. This was another corner of the slabs that I'd only partially explored and it was only that I was living down in the wash that brought me up that way in the first place. There was a back way and I had started taking it. This was good timing too because a miracle occurred. The desert bloomed and along that route was the prettiest flowerscape.

The man I met was wearing a black shirt with red sleeves and around his neck hung a large cloisonne fish. I'd found him sheltered out of the wind behind one of the big tanks writing. His dog alerted when it saw me but didn't bark and the man didn't notice that I was there until I greeted him. He was that deep into his journal.

The man was clear eyed and right away asked me for a cigarette. I rolled us each one and joined him in the sand to smoke together. I told him that I write too, hoping that he would tell me what he liked to write about. He didn't say but instead replied, "I've only ever read one book," and didn't even tell me what book it was.

He said that he absorbed knowledge. That what we can know isn't written and he took a lot of words to say this. If it hadn't been so similar to what I think about, I wouldn't have been able to follow him. Even with that, I had to take in his words the same way he found understanding, in gestalt. It was like a soup of ideas and the spoon was to feel the ideas beyond the words.

My rap was a lot simpler but it was the same. I kept it simple, very simple. I mean I didn't even want to say what I thought I knew because I didn't know anything. I could hint at glimmers of truth in the way I put a story perhaps and paying attention to the stories is how I understood if I understood at all. I'd certainly learned that stories live on and the story here is that two men, writers, sat in the sand together and listened to each other. This was brotherhood, my favorite story.

Brotherhood wasn't the only story though and things happened even in the middle of the night. Back at my camp I heard a voice crying out in the desert. I couldn't tell just where it was coming from and didn't know what they were saying but I hollered back a couple times with no response. The voice moved too and it was only in that movement that I was able to localize the sound. Finally, I heard it more clearly. Someone was screaming, "Help."

In that direction from my camp there was nothing. Except for me, nobody else would have heard the plea. I had to act. There was no moon and the night was dark but I could see in the dark. I also have a great sense of direction and made a beeline towards them, looking back a few times to mark my return path, taking my bearings from lights in the distance.

When I got closer, a large threatening dog came at me barking aggressively. I stopped, calmed myself, and hung my arms

at my sides with the palms in so the dog could approach and sniff the back of my hand. Luckily, I knew the body language or the animal would not have let me approach. Instead it licked my hand and I went on with the dog at my side.

There across the ravine was a woman with no shoes wearing only socks, pajama pants, and a bra top. It wasn't super cold but the night was chill and she was shivering. I gave her my jacket. She was okay except for being cold, disoriented, and for having mesquite thorns in her feet. Because of the thorns, she didn't think that she could walk but the promise of a warm fire motivated her and I helped her back to my camp.

She had no idea where she was or where she wanted to go. That she was out in the desert far from any friends or family disturbed her. She kept saying, "Why aren't they looking for me?"

I had lots of firewood and time. I gave her water then made coffee. The moon rose. I hadn't met her before but I knew who she was and where she needed to go. It took a long time for her to be ready though and I knew I would have to walk her out. I was off the beaten track.

We talked the whole time, perhaps for two hours. She derided her friend for not being there. She said, "He chose Buddhism," as if that should have given him a heart of compassion. I knew though that Buddhism isn't necessarily a route to Buddha nature.

Eventually, the light of the rising moon lit the desert and we set out for the Slabs. When we reached her friend's slab, she flew into a rage and started pulling things from the fence around the compound, throwing them in towards their shelter but we were too far away for these objects to reach anything.

At the gate, I waited to make sure she was found but I was

in no way going to get involved in their conflict. I heard her say, “This dickhead walked me here.”

He replied, “Why don’t you just go with your new boyfriend?”

I left at those misrepresentations. It was one in the morning by then and I made the long walk home arriving at two. Later, I wrote the rest of the story:

She asked, “You’re sitting across from the queen of the damned, the devil herself. Does that bother you?”

I didn’t reply. We were at my fire and my wards were set. I was at home, safe, and secure. I’d rescued her from the desert shivering and disoriented. Would I help the devil herself if she called out?

I was sober. She’d drank to a blackout right after taking two sugar cubes laced with LSD. When I found her, she thought I was immigration. Part of her disorientation was because she thought the many lights far below in the valley were border patrol closing in but she knew she was white and couldn’t figure out why they were after her.

When I got her back to my fire, that heat awoke the demon in her. It challenged me. It called me names and accused me of what I couldn’t possibly do.

I was stoic, completely in my strength. Undisturbed. There’s a power in goodwill that no devil can negate. I offered coffee and later made her a sandwich.

The devil went away. Then the woman was just my sister. I babysat her while she held off other demons. I steadied her on her journey until her strength returned.

When I ran into the couple a few days later, I was

applauded for being the hero of the night and they used the same words which I had. They said, "Thanks for babysitting."

There was one final example of brotherhood before I left the city and I wrote about it then:

It turns out that dread swapping is a thing. I'd seen them cut, gifted, and left in sacrifice to sacred mountains but never swapped. Then came Fox and amid his ebony locks there lay a golden dread, this one grown in brotherhood, its complement twisted into the threads of Lurp's sparse beard making him look Egyptian, like a statue of Thutmose or a similar ancient. They'd traded, their gifts of hair flowing in each other like the blood of an oath. Dread brothers indeed.

11

Borderlands

As I rolled up my tarps and hammock to leave Slab City, a soaking wet golden retriever ran past at full speed on a beeline up the wash. About five minutes later a black setter, also soaking wet, ran past perpendicular to the first dog. Their tracks formed a cross and this was as obvious to me as the message in the sand had been. I didn't know what it meant except that it was so surreal as to call for meaning. Could this be another petroglyph?

There was another dog when I reached the road and it was barking at every car that drove past. I knew this animal though. It was Christ, and he was no metaphor for the symbol I'd just seen tracked into the sand, but simply a dog and his people were resting there in the shade of the old guard shack. Friends already, they gave me a gift of smoke for the road. There was at least some meaning in this, love and brotherhood for sure.

The road was the same as I left it: hot, dry, and then dusty. There was a mini dust storm but not at all like the blow the week before. My route was due south through the Imperial Valley, a vast agricultural kingdom as flat as Kansas. The valley was

surrounded by distant mountains which receded as the plain broadened. Eventually, the ranges south of Mexicali would come into view.

From Brawley, farm roads took me to Imperial where I turned east towards Holtville. Night fell while I rested at a city park in the middle of the town. There was electricity and I was finding a certain serendipity in all the action around me. There were little league games, couples strolling through the park, and music blasting from street rods making their loops on neighboring streets.

It was a moonless night and I rode on under the stars following the bright circle cast before me by my headlight. Holtville Hot Springs was easy to find in the dark and I arrived at about eight thirty. It was really dark too and I could barely see the people in the pool, only that there were some. I asked if the pool was clothing optional and a disembodied voice replied out of the darkness, "No," so I went back to my bike and put on shorts. When I got back to the pool though, my eyes had adjusted and everyone was in fact naked.

That got my goat and I asked why they would say no. I added, "You're standing there naked."

The naked man replied, "The rules are to wear clothes."

Although I felt a temper rising, laughter was a better medicine. The water was just that healing, a place to find peace not to be angry. I came out of the dark like that and later would call the place the Mother of the Waters.

A man was there from Culiacán and we talked about Mazatlan as we soaked, a city which he knew well. At the beach in Mazatlan, grand monuments line the coast honoring the sea and families stroll the malecon laughing as they walk between them.

Reliving those memories was simply lovely for both of us.

Refreshed by this long soak and the new friendship, I rode out into the desert and made camp in the night, setting up my tent, building a fire, and then finally cooking supper. I was famished and my day wasn't over until I had food in my stomach. Rolled out in the sand next to my fire I could finally contemplate where I was and what I was going to do next. The first order of business was to soak again.

Holtville Hot Springs was a true oasis. The overflow from the springs formed a large pond which was entirely surrounded by tall palm trees. The soaking pool itself was concrete, very large, and almost six feet deep.

My bath the night before had begun to wash the toxic dust of Slab City out of me and even after another night on the floor of the desert I still felt reborn but had not had enough yet. Volunteers were cleaning the springs when I returned though and it would be two hours before the pools were refilled, a small amount of time to wait for one more round of the healing waters.

There were about ten other people waiting including a family with three children who were traveling in an old Bluebird bus. Their daughter was seven which I could tell from her new front teeth which were just growing in. I teased her later that I was seven too which was obvious from the fact that I was also missing two front teeth. I told her that I'd be seven until my new ones grew in (here I am, still seven).

The girl and her little brother were running circles around me where I stood under the spray of the hot spring shower despite their mother telling them twice to stop. I was glad they didn't because their patterns filled me with joy. It was flow movement, pure and innocent but every bit as effective as that practiced by

adepts with intent.

The pool was finally full enough and we all got in. The men talked about CBD and Rick Simpson oil. One of them said, "People are curing themselves of cancer." I listened. I'd been suffering from laryngitis for three days by then and it hurt to talk. Later it would hurt to ride too and I would stop for the day early.

The father of the children and I became friends. After we got out of the pool, I agreed to meet them at their bus. That's when I teased the little girl about her teeth. I gave the man one of my books too and when I handed it to him, his oldest son grabbed it right away and started reading. I warned the father that it might warp his mind to which he replied, "Too late."

Out of that whole family, I only remember the name of the mother, Jess. Her presence stayed with me because when I shared a story from Mexico of being high on elderberry syrup and breathing through my chakras, we came into our hearts. As we talked, we breathed this chakra illumination. I was telling the story in a way which invited participation and together we did experience it. It was a breath not simply present either, but encompassing all of everything, the rainbow breath.

For me, to ride was to breathe and to breathe was to ride and I rode on. My route was the frontage road of the interstate and there was no traffic for twenty miles. With no distractions, I had plenty of time to feel miserable and I did. Some of that elderberry syrup would have done me a world of good just then and it was frustrating that after several days I still didn't feel much better. The day before had been a bit easier but not by much. Riding late into the night had been wearing too and certainly hadn't helped.

From the Imperial Dunes Recreation Area, there was no

other route except for the interstate shoulder and I had to take a more measured pace as it was very bumpy. At this slower rate the beauty of the dunes was spectacular. They weren't as majestic as the Algodones Dunes farther north but they swallowed the landscape. It was a world that was all dunes. Their only flaw was the long tall wall erected at the border dividing the Mexican dunes from their American brothers. The kangaroo rats could likely pass through but not much of anything else.

A rest area along the way was quite inaccessible. It was in the center of the freeway and there was too much traffic to cross over. It would have been easier to climb the wall into Mexico. This would be the only place remotely welcoming to stop until Ogilvy Road where I'd turned north two years earlier.

A thick mesquite grove stood at the intersection and a particularly inviting nook convinced me to stop for the night. It was only four in the afternoon but as rough as the interstate shoulder had been, the frontage road would be worse. I remembered it from back then and in no way wanted to add to my misery. Instead, I made a sweet camp and recalled the strength I'd had even right there only a few years earlier. I set out from this spot to a region where no bicycle like the one I had at the time should have gone. I was strong then, even stronger now, and regarding my healing, I also had strength for that.

There was indeed some relief by morning; I slept well both that night and the night before. Away from the Slabs and back to the desert, I owned the landscape. It was mine alone and solitary like that, it owned me too. There was no one else. After three months with thousands of people, having the stars to myself again reminded me that I was home, even here in a barren desert.

Now I was on my way to the Center of the World, a

spectacular monument where the history of the world is inscribed in granite. I'd been there before and talked with a woman from British Columbia about a John Dunne poem chiseled into the stone. At this time though, I couldn't even get in. They'd just laid a thick layer of pea gravel on their drive and I didn't have the energy to push my bike down it. I was at the center of the world but couldn't enter. My certain solution was the same as always, to center myself just where I was in the world. I was at the center of my own world and what might I find there which I could share?

My route was finally downhill and the road was better past the monument. After a few more miles of interstate riding on a protected bike lane, there was a pleasant descent down Araz Road to the Colorado River Valley. All along the way, campers and other van dwellers were parked at every pull off. I wasn't the only traveler in the world.

Workers were harvesting lettuce and broccoli at the bottom of the hill and I gave the Mexican whistle of greeting to the few that were close to the road. They responded like they do in the great country south of the border, with the look that says, "Here we are, men working in the fields. And there you are, a man like us."

The market in Winterhaven was so overpriced that it made May's store in Niland look like a discount store. I gaped at the prices and left without buying anything. There was a smaller store down the street though and two old men were out front speaking Spanish. One of the men was in a wheelchair and didn't have any legs so I refrained from making any jokes about the other shop charging an arm and leg. I might have said, "I see you've been there."

It's not like I needed to buy anything anyway. All I wanted

was another coffee and while I filled my cup the wheeled man rolled off. The other man and I talked about Mexico, about how much we loved the country and we wondered why we stayed here. What was it about Oosa, (the USA), that was so magnetic? What we both knew about Mexico was compelling and we shared a certain brotherhood in that.

From the bridge over the Colorado River, my last view of California was of four men far below me who were gathered at a Slab-like camp amid many other camps. The Arizona side of the river was manicured and adorned with a fantastic recreational trail. Looking at both sides from the center of the bridge, I realized that if I was going to stop, it probably would have been on the ungoverned side. I had the Slabs in me now.

Although I loved Yuma because of dancing in the streets with Claire and Miles two years earlier, and also for the other bright encounters I'd had there, all I could see this time was want and misery. The people on the street were in manifest pain and it was like a mental ward. Where were the normal people? Was anyone normal? Not in Yuma.

My needs were simple though, first WiFi then something to eat. After the library I rode to the mission for lunch but got there five minutes late. They gave me a sack lunch anyway and that's when I realized that I was still miserable, when I finally opened the bag I could hardly eat. I still felt that ill from the Slab malady and this also might have explained my mood.

Back at the library, I remet two Jehovah's Witness workers from Alberta that I'd met two years ago. It was good at first, they remembered me, but the man got kind of aggressive when I didn't agree with the organizational aspect of his belief. He was convinced that their denomination was the only route to

salvation. Well, I'd never been involved in a doctrinal dispute and his body language was as if to say that he was ready to fight. This kind of put the proof to my point that the words he studied were simply words about the Word and not the Word itself. He could not grasp that concept and I left. It felt like he wanted to punch me.

By then I needed to charge my devices and the exterior outlets at the library were disabled as was almost every other publicly accessible outdoor outlet in the city. This was uncivilized planning. Yuma will always have tramps so give them juice. Not having it was no deterrence.

The discomfort I was feeling from the illness was definitely coloring my mood and it made me feel like shaking the dust off my sandals and riding on. As I made my way out of the city, I passed the Littlewood Artists Coop and stopped there. There were painters painting and a gallery. There were people, real people and I felt at home right away. After meeting and becoming friends with everyone, I donated a book for their in-store library. A bit later, a young man who had seen me make the offering, showed me a book of his sketches that he'd had printed via Google.

Later we sat outside together, and confiding in me, it immediately became obvious that he had schizophrenia. I should have known from his art and he admitted it. He controlled his symptoms medicinally but what was interesting was that when he described the symptoms he unconsciously showed me just where in the brain that he felt them.

Perhaps I was only supposing from his body language but I saw something inside his head, a disruption in his energy so to speak, so I told him the story about the man experiencing cerebral

swelling who actually had candida. The crux of the story was that I'd put my hands on that other man and somehow from that knew he had the yeast infection. I accepted that this works but didn't know how or why. I only knew that we could allow for this facilitation of healing.

Also willing to experiment with the foundational aspects of truth, my new friend asked me to put my hands on his head too. It was a short healing and I'll never know the result if any but it left me feeling like a clogged drain which I snaked by discharging into the concrete beneath us. I didn't do anything for him except to allow for possibility. I cared and acted and this is at the heart of healing in any modality. Cared for in return, I rode on loved.

My own snake oil, the only poor substitute I could find in the modern commercial district of Yuma anyway, was a small dark roast with two electrical outlets at a coffee shop. I parked my bike next to an urban sled of a fully stocked shopping cart then sat inside next to the homeless woman who drove it. She was trying to watch YouTube videos, listening to them on headphones, and every time the WiFi failed, she cussed out loud oblivious to anyone else there.

This cacophony was quite enough for me and I made my escape. I didn't know it then but within a few days I would be seated at a table with the Children of God eating the fruit of the desert. On this night though, the desert was within reach and I could at least have that. I followed the Gila River Valley east, rode in the dark through farm fields almost to Blaisdell, then turned south on Fortuna Road.

Between the Gila River bottomland and the interstate the desert was bare except for short mesquite and chaparral. It was a simple matter, but not easy, to half carry my bike through the

deep sand to a spot more or less out of sight of the road. As usual, I went about twice as far as I really needed to go. I wanted the sky to myself and also wanted to be so alone that the desert itself could find me.

At peace and rolled out under the stars, I was present and this was my relief. My own tracks to this place, to this state of mind, were another petroglyph, a symbol for the ages that only the desert, (and those mystics who find themselves at home there), could ever read.