

America, The Human Tapestry

by Michael Beckett

Taking a road trip across America is a rite of passage, no matter when a person makes the journey. Many years ago, I drove from Boston to San Francisco with nothing more than some mix tapes and a jumble of hastily packed possessions. The experience changed my life.

Last fall I took a longer trip. Only this time it wasn't a solo venture. I've been a longtime mentor and surrogate dad to a teenager – now a young man – in a South African settlement. To celebrate ten years together we drove 10,000 miles around the United States. Because we're usually separated by an ocean, I wanted to have some extended time with my son ... and to share an epic adventure.

And we did, taking in many bucket list sights. Times Square. Yosemite Valley. Bourbon Street. The Lincoln Memorial and the Hollywood sign. The staggering beauty of the Grand Canyon. The rainbow mist of Niagara Falls. Bison at Old Faithful. Sunset at Big Sur. These images are iconic; they represent America.

A few months ago, chafing at pandemic-related travel restrictions, I decided to relive the road trip, to bask in those feelings of exploration and discovery and wonder again. I closed my eyes and let my mind retrace our route.

But the travelogue movie didn't play out as I expected. The postcard imagery quickly gave way to something else, perhaps due to the limited social contact we all endure now. Because what popped into my head were people we met along the way...

The trio of girls working the gift shop at the Statue of Liberty, who gamely posed for our first cheesy selfie of the trip.

The volunteer from Queens at the 9/11 Museum whose heartfelt, personal stories helped my son understand the impact of that day better than all the exhibits. (He was awed by your dedication.)

The grandfatherly docent at the National Air and Space Museum who made us feel like we were on the dunes at Kitty Hawk for the Wright Brothers' famous flight.

The tour guide in the Virginia caverns whose corny and informative patter helped me forget the unnerving fact that we were deep underground.

The North Carolina woman who made a few crumbling, forlorn buildings on a rural road come alive with childhood tales of penny candy and Al Capone. (A favorite moment of the trip, Miss M.)

The woman in Savannah who succumbed to my charm and gave us an unsanctioned tour of the First African Baptist church, built by slaves under cover of darkness. (My devout Christian son loved it.)

The Gulfport cook whose simple eggs-and-bacon breakfast provided our introduction to the Waffle House after seeing its unfamiliar yellow signs across the South. (And of course we had waffles!)

The smokin' hot band with its energetic elder front man who entertained a diverse, happy crowd in a Beale Street park for hours one night. (And the dancing woman who, when asked where she was from after dropping a dollar in the tip bucket said, "Up the street.")

The cattle wrangler in Fort Worth taking tourist photos on a longhorn steer, who showed my son that black cowboys do exist – and forgot to charge us. (I owe you five bucks.)

The throwback hippie woman selling modern-day lattes out of a colorful old school bus along the Rio Grande Gorge in New Mexico.

The grad student working in the lab at the Petrified Forest, who wowed the closet science geek in me with her trove of knowledge and dinosaur fossils.

The Cleveland Browns fan watching football at the Arizona brew pub who good-naturedly hated me because I'm from New England. (Brady's gone; maybe all is forgiven?)

The gentleman who excused my rusty high school Spanish when I showed him how to use the oddly high-tech, touch-screen washers in an Idaho laundromat.

The handsome cowboy seemingly plucked out of a Ralph Lauren ad who offered a smooth "How you doin' today?" outside a roadside cafe in Wyoming. (Will you marry me?)

The Jiffy Lube mechanic in Nebraska who added a surprising local anecdote to the debate over which are scarier: hurricanes, earthquakes, or tornadoes.

The chunky gay guy in the adjacent booth at a Perkin's Restaurant in Iowa wearing a BOOT EDGE EDGE for President t-shirt. (Sigh. Maybe next time.)

The women at the jerk chicken stand in Rockefeller Center who gave the back-story on why their hottest hot sauce is called "Disrespectful." (I'm comin' back for seconds!)

The waiter at a tiny place in Rutherford who served me a perfect dish of risotto on a chilly fall night. (And the trio of women providing a gossipy soundtrack in hard Jersey accents.)

There's nothing extraordinary about these experiences. They're just random encounters, moments in time from a long trip that had many moments. But today, when interacting with strangers requires distance and maybe a bit of courage, these brief connections seem like they're of a different world. They take on new resonance.

On his few visits here, my son's always been struck by how chatty Americans are. How open they are to express their thoughts and opinions – and to ask for his. During last fall's journey he got to experience that from coast to coast and back again. And he's come to understand that America isn't about breathtaking scenery and soaring monuments. It's people – from all walks of life connecting in ways large and small every day. It's easy to forget how unique that is, and how lucky we are.

It's been a tough year. In fact, the last few years have been tough. Anger and conflict and division seem to lurk around every corner. It's important for us to remember that deep down we're all the same: fragile, imperfect beings trying to make the most of our relatively brief time here. Let's appreciate that. Let's celebrate our similarities and our differences, each one of us a part of the vibrant human tapestry that is America. This will carry us through hard times, and help us soar in good times.

In the meantime, I'd like to say thank you to all the folks spread out along our road trip route. Thanks for sharing a bit of yourselves with us and being part of our adventure. I hope you're healthy – and wish the same for everyone who matters to you. Someday we'll all be out and about again, living our everyday lives. Who knows, we might even meet again. It'll be good to see you.

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