

## NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

As the years go by and your reader ascends ever closer to the top of death row in the roster of this estimable organization, he finds himself wondering, not wandering if his latest essay will be his last. I have been blessed to be part of three budgets this club year, the topics: music I have listened to in November, reading I have enjoyed coming up in March and tonight some of my formative early travels. It feels as if I am summing up the total of my life experiences piecemeal, music, reading, travel.

A friend of years ago whose father was a much-esteemed Literarian refused to join our society. He opined that it was just a bunch of old guys recounting reminiscences of their youth and he had better ways to spend his time on Monday evenings. I hope that all my papers are more than mere reminiscence, that they are part of a process of self-discovery that I find increasingly important to continue the closer I get to the end of the line. I want to share the results of some of that self-discovering with you. Unlike the fortunate well-heeled young gentlemen on their travels in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by the time I was close to the end of my collegiate education I had travelled very little, and I saw no opportunity to do any on my own. I had no money and with the Vietnam War heating up, I couldn't quit school without having Uncle Sam giving me a tour of duty I was not ready to accept. The sum total of my excursions out of Louisville had consisted of a trip to the Smokies with my family when I was in my teens, a summer vacation en famille to Tampa/ St. Pete a couple of years later, and a trip with my Aunt Bea to Panama City, Florida, the redneck Riviera. All my

illuminating “travels” had been in the books you will hear about in my “Reading, Pennsylvania” paper next month—if I don’t bore you to death tonight.

I did not have the time to wander as my title would intimate. The source of my travels was nothing so grandiloquent as the treks of Frodo Baggins in the Fellowship of the Ring Trilogy of J. R. R. Tolkien, whence comes the strikingly fine, assertive and yet ambiguous statement that “not all who wander are lost.” I used the pedestrian path of becoming a tour guide as a compensated avenue to see some of the world that I desperately yearned to be part of. In 1965 a college buddy told me about a summer job he was going to have to pass up between our junior and senior years. He had led tours out of Louisville, our hometown, for Wayfarer Travel to the New York World Fair of 1964-65. I jumped at the chance to take his place the second summer of the Fair. Not only did it give me the chance to make my first visits to New York City, I got to take my first train rides, from Louisville up to the even then ghostly Union Station here in Cincinnati, where I picked up my tourists and shepherded them overnight to Washington and from there by motor coach to the Big Apple.

You may wonder why anyone would have paid actual dollars for a trip via overnight train through the West Virginia mountains with stops at Keyser and other metropolises, then to Washington’s dilapidated Union Station and beyond. The heyday of the railroad was long past but that didn’t stop a sample of hayseeds from the Middle West from climbing aboard. As my tourists rubbed the sleepy dust from their eyes on a Saturday morning in Washington, they were picked up by motor coach and taken on a tour of the Capital, with a side trip to Mount Vernon. Then they returned to Union

Station to pick up me and their bags and we rolled up I-95 through the beautiful Jersey Meadows to the Sheraton Hotel, on 56<sup>th</sup> Street as I recall.

I didn't see much or learn much in my brief stays in Washington on the front end of these tours. The itinerary would take us back to Washington for the trip home from New York at the end of our week at the Fair, and on the first of these, I walked the length of Pennsylvania Avenue, climbed the steps of the Capitol and looked back down the Mall at the grandeur of the public buildings, the White House, and the Washington Monument. I loved it all but was painfully aware that I was not part of it. I had seen the two Johnson girls on television, Luci Baines and Lynda Byrd later Robb, wife of a philandering Virginia politician. They were about my age then, and I knew that just as I was so were they somewhere in the vast city. I was painfully aware that they were living their lives on an entirely different, elevated plane than I and that I would never meet them.

Meaningful contact with Washington remained many years ahead. However, the trips on to New York City gave me my first engagement with the highs and lows of real life. There were lunches at the Stage Deli, with occasional viewings of New York stage luminaries. On a much more pedestrian level as I found myself meeting a panoply of new acquaintances in various locations, I was approached by gays on the prowl. They as individuals and the situations were far different from the dark picture that had formed in my mind, the result of the adolescent, uncouth homophobic raillery I had been part of back home. To this day I am not sure what these lonely fellows—well-dressed businessmen, younger guys in sportier clothes—found appealing in a wide-eyed simpleton from the boondocks. Perhaps it was just that. It was disconcerting to me but

resolutely hetero, always friendly but blithely dismissive, I preserved my virtue and am none the worse for the experience.

On a more intellectual level, while my Wayfarer Tours charges spent their evenings at such pursuits as Radio City and the Rockettes, I used the entertainment stipend Wayfarer generously gave me to see Off Broadway productions down in the Village, and musical offerings at places like the Village Gate and the Village Vanguard. It was also fun to frequent the city bookshops that were plentiful in those days.

I couldn't help noticing that there were other tour companies working the same venues, the World's Fair and the other stops. These competitors were larger, better organized and more sophisticated than my little Midwestern employer. As we dropped off our tourists at various locations and waited for them to return the tour guides from the different companies indulged in shop talk. The slick boys working for infamous Parker Tours were eager to clue the rest of us in on the extra trips and clips they foisted off on their customers. At a higher level resided the preppy and fresh faced employees of the Cadillac of the industry, Tauck Tours. Their guides seemed to genuinely like the company and they told the rest of us about the far-flung tours that the company offered: a chance to see many places beyond the two gems of the Northeast Corridor, Washington and New York City.

When the season was over and I was back at Bellarmine College for my senior year I wrote Tauck. Somewhat to my surprise I was hired for the following summer. It was going to be a big year for Tauck and they assigned me to the New England-Montreal-Quebec City tour that took in Canadian Expo '67. This gave me a chance to see for the first time New England, French Canada, the Maine woods, Portland, and

Boston in one grand loop before returning at the end of each cycle to our bivouac at the Roosevelt Hotel adjoining Grand Central Station. I loved it.

In addition to the varied locales there was a rich mix of both passengers and my fellow tour guides, ski instructors supplementing their winter income with summer tour work, kids from the New England colleges and universities and our roughhewn bus drivers, full timers and firemen earning bucks on their weeks off. We were all scrambling for the nice tips that the riders on the full Tauck buses left us in sealed envelopes at tour's end. I had never met such a variety of people. Skipping to the end of one season I will always remember my bevy of blue rinsed widows, halting elderly gents in tweed jackets, and an assortment of seekers after experience from all over the United States, gathered around me in a motel lobby in Cambridge, Massachusetts as we waited for our bus to come around. We were all as excited as the Bostonians. It was the morning of the opening of Boston's first trip to the World Series in many years, featuring Big Yaz, Tony Conigliaro and so many others. I felt alive in a way that I had never experienced before. This was life, and I was finally part of it.

There were many experiences of this type. One was being out for a night of too many drinks on the town in New York City with the older, full time tour guides. These were a tough bunch of fellows whom I would have little to say to today—except how fondly I remember them—but who appeared on the surface to be the repository of all worldly wisdom. That night three of us were in a nondescript NYC gin mill and a girl came in and announced to the three of us that she had just fucked Frank Gifford, the long time New York Giants football great. Quite a come on line. I was shocked into silence. My ultra hip companions were so inept that it led to nothing, except that I

remember it to this day and share it with you. Whether this young lady and Frank actually found each other for one magic moment will always remain one of life's mysteries. More affirmatively, I remember the friendship I formed with a guy whom I am still in contact with. He is a psychiatrist, practicing in Brookline, Massachusetts and teaching at Harvard. I remember his lovely parents, citizens of Flushing, Queens, who welcomed me into their home. They were the first Jewish family I came into contact with. It was a wonderful learning experience for the Catholic boy from the boondocks. Just so I recall so many others from all walks and experiences.

I remember my final trip that year, leaving Stowe, Vermont as we travelled North, I'm not sure of the destination that day. My arm was around one of the waitresses from the hotel restaurant who had come out to see off the bus and especially me. As we chatted I saw the early fall snow on the surrounding mountains. Something hit me. It was October and I was late getting back to school. I determined at that minute that this was the end; I would go back to Columbia right away, the day the trip concluded. All the concerned people on my bus had warned me I had better do so. I had laughed them off but now I was to do it.

As much as I loved it, I left the road, completed my education, married and taught at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. As I made my way around Saratoga those years, I could not help but see the occasional Tauck Tour bus coming through our scenic town. I had the nagging feeling that I still belonged on those busses, that I remained the transient spectator of life that I had been back in those days, that I did not really belong as a college professor, teaching the children of well to do New

Englishers and prosperous suburbanites from across the US about a world I knew too little of.

Then, one day, now divorced I was downtown in Congress Park, near the Saratoga Casino. Off the bus, amid a bevy of LOLs—that is, little old ladies, came my Aunts Phyllis and Rose, two of my father’s sisters who played a large role in my upbringing. Quite a surprise, I hadn’t seen them in years, but after the hugs and kisses one thing led to another and I volunteered to the Driver and Tour Director to give their charges including my aunts a free tour of Saratoga and Skidmore. My aunts got to meet my girlfriend and her two young daughters. It all went well, and I realize only now, that in that moment, I stopped being a wanderer and was no longer lost. I was on the path that I have taken pretty much directly from that day to this. I left academe, married the wonderful lady who has been my companion these last 47 years, acquired instant family, went to law school and so you see me now.

I have been a lawyer, I still am a reader, and I still listen every chance I get to the music of my lifetime, Chuck Berry, The Beatles, the Stones, all the rest. It is what I appreciate and get out of life. The road, the journey, the voyage, these are the inescapable metaphors that give meaning to my life and tasks. At the Mercantile Library, I conduct Literary Journeys to this or that country, this or that genre, this or that seminal period in the development of life and thought. At law, never did a negotiation go down without my saying toward its conclusion, “Well gentlemen, we are running out of road. . . .” before a pregnant pause. In my last email to my colleagues at my last law firm, I invoked the image of the Sheriff in Blazing Saddles, riding off into the sunset.

I am still curious. What is over the next hill, around the next bend? I've moved from the sententious pronouncement of Oxbridge don Tolkien and his wandering hobbits, ents and wizards, to the world I lived on the road with Tauck Tours, as voiced by my fellow Columbian, Jack Kerouac. Late in his masterpiece, On the Road, Neal Cassidy/Dean Moriarty and Jack aka Sal Paradise pause in Denver from their incessant slingshot forays back and forth across the continent. But it is never over, as Jack so eloquently puts it, echoing the last lines of *The Great Gatsby*:

Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.

I could not agree with Kerouac more. There are still “longer ways to go.” To me the road is life, but I also find the reverse. Life is a road. If we are moving, and better if moving toward something we want, something we need to understand, we are not yet dead. If two paths diverge in a yellow wood, no matter. We can take one of them. Either will make all the difference. The road, the path is life.