

This is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress by Jeffrey Sawyer, originally published in *The Sun* magazine, [June 2004, Issue 342](#). From *The Sun* bio: Jeffrey Sawyer is in the Pacific Northwest. Email: jeffreysawyer1@yahoo.com Sawyer gave permission for me to include the entire excerpt here. Part of it is available on *The Sun*'s web site: http://www.thesunmagazine.org/Sun342_Sawyer.pdf The editor's note below was written by the editor of *The Sun*. OpenOffice.org 1.1 was used to create this PDF.

An Inquiry Into Living While Walking The Roads Of America, Mexico, And Beyond

Jeffrey Sawyer

A few years ago, Jeffrey Sawyer quit his job, sold all his possessions, and set out walking from Asheville, North Carolina. He had no destination in mind and no goal except to inquire into the meaning of life, love, and freedom. After traveling as far as Minnesota, he returned to where he started. Since then he has taken many such journeys, not only in the continental U.S. but in Mexico, Hawaii, and Southeast Asia. Everywhere he goes, he carries little or no money and does most of his traveling on foot. The following excerpts are from an unpublished book about his experiences on the road.

— Ed.

HAZARD, Kentucky, April 2001: It had rained quite a bit, and the cool weather refreshed my tired legs and mind. The birds began to sing early, and the mist lifted from the sorrows of the valleys to the bluing sky. Coal trucks streamed up and down the back mountain roads twenty-four hours a day, hugging each sharp turn with an uncanny precision, nudging me closer to the edge. It was tough walking in those parts.

There was a great longing and loneliness inside me. And as I delved into this loneliness, I asked, "Is there an ultimate freedom?" I would eventually walk some thirty-five hundred miles of back roads in the United States and Mexico. Having left behind everything I knew, I had nowhere to go, nothing to do but die into this question. I'd never really wished to be an explorer, yet this inquiry moved me to let go of all that was not entirely new and alive. So my walking journey began.

Though others may be able to look within themselves without leaving job, home, family, and friends, it was solitude that captivated me. I wished to give all my attention to exploring the capacities of the heart and mind. As I walked, a few questions became predominant: Must a

person work, and what happens if one does not? What happens when one has no money and no motive to get any? Is it possible to live entirely free in this culture?

I had needed a vehicle only to drive to work, so I had sold my truck to pay off my debts and given away what else I owned. As I had no cottage in the woods to which I could retreat, walking seemed the most obvious course. For two and a half years I walked back roads connecting small towns. The roads and communities became a monastery of sorts to me, a place for playful inquiry.

In the mountains I took trails to shorten distances or provide a respite from the cars. But mostly I stuck to lightly traveled roads. I didn't hitchhike, but I accepted rides if people offered them of their own accord. It was a fine way to meet people. Also, it seemed rude to decline if someone was willing to risk pulling over for a strange man. Resting a spell in the car was a treat, too.

In my pack I carried a mosquito net, a pair of linen pants, a bathing suit, a blanket, two ponchos, a fleece jacket and hat, a long-sleeved shirt, two t-shirts, a pair of socks, some matches, and a bit of flour and salt. I wore a pair of sandals. With these items I could fit in anywhere, or at least not stick out as an oddity. I carried no ATM card, no credit card, and no tent. Most of the time I had no sleeping bag and no money. When I did have money, it was usually just a few dollars, certainly no more than thirty.

"How do you eat if you have no money?" people would ask me. At first, I familiarized myself with edible plants and spent my days with my eyes to the ground, finding things to throw into an evening stew with some salt: chickweed, dandelion leaves, violet leaves, wild onions, flowers, shoots, acorns. I would heat them up over a fire and eat them in the evening. With some flour, I would roll the leftovers into dumplings and take them with me on the road.

It seemed that, as hunger arose, I would be drawn instinctively to edible mushrooms and plants. The more quiet and attuned to the environment my mind became, the more effortless living was.

EARLY one afternoon, I was tired and hungry. I'd already had a full day: cars and trucks flying by, dead groundhogs, the smell of exhaust, cigarette butts, downed butterflies, and jeers from a passing sports car. I had also run out of food, and the nearest town was some ten miles up the Blue Ridge Parkway. I saw a large oak tree and thought it would be nice to sit by it for a time and ponder the nature of hunger more thoroughly. I walked up to the tree and looked around its base to find a nice spot for my back. As I poked my head around the far side, I spotted a great batch of a wild mushroom sometimes called "chicken-of-the-woods." My spirits soared. I took out my little pocketknife and cut into the brainlike orange fungus.

At first I thought I had best grab just enough for a meal and let the rest be. Tomorrow would take care of itself. Then I told myself I had better take a bit more, just to be safe. So I cut away three football-sized hunks of the heavy mushroom. It didn't feel quite right taking more than I needed, but it made sense, since I was far from civilization and didn't want to be hungry again the next

day. I put the mushrooms in a bag and strapped them to my pack.

Walking along a trail through the forest, I found a fire pit and a log to sit on under some huge hemlock trees. I stopped and sautéed the mushrooms with a bit of salt and some wild onions. They tasted just like marinated chicken. I couldn't recall a meal so delicious.

I thought it best to cook up some mushrooms for dinner as well. While I cooked, I ate some more. It was going to be a tough walk up these hills, and I didn't want to run short of energy. Surely the rest of the mushrooms would not keep uncooked until the next day, so I sautéed them too, eating all the while.

While I was bagging up the cooked mushrooms, I began to feel sick to my stomach. I was stuffed, my belly aching. I lay on the leaves under the hemlock trees to rest.

I had become greedy. I had carved out too many mushrooms from the tree because I was afraid. Because I had too many, I had eaten too many.

Still, I didn't want to let food go to waste. I tied the bag to the side of my pack. It made me feel lopsided and weighed me down as I made my way up the hills. My stomach was bloated. It was a long walk.

The next day I woke and ate some more chicken-of-the-woods for breakfast. For lunch, though I wasn't hungry, I ate a bit more. They tasted like duty now, not the singing mushrooms they'd been when I'd first eaten just enough. I threw out the rest, which had begun to smell. As I pushed the bag into a trash can, my mood lightened.

AFTER a time I stopped worrying so much about food and just walked north, talking with people along the way. I ate what became available and soon became indifferent to whether I ate or not. I came to the conclusion that, for me, understanding was more important than food. I may not have had a piece of chicken, but I had a peace of mind. This attended to my hunger for days, whereas when I had more food without understanding the root of desire, it wasn't long before I became agitated, fearful, and again hungry.

I usually had a dollar or less in my pocket, but ultimately food would show up. A person would ask, "You want something to eat?" or perhaps a loaf of bread would fall off a truck. One time I found ninety-five dollars along a curb. Sometimes there was just enough money on the ground to buy some fruit or soup. But mostly food came from unpredictable places: a library pizza day in Pennsylvania; a generous homeless man in Mexico; a sandbar picnic on the Mississippi with one of the leaders of the Teamsters Union; venison from a man's freezer in Iowa. It became clear that the amount of food I could gather or buy by my own doing was negligible in comparison to the abundance that arrived when I ceased making any effort at all.

I WAS sitting on the curb by a convenience store near the Carolina coast. The Lay's-potato-chip deliveryman came by and asked, "You waiting to go to work?"

"No."

"What are you doing?"

"Walking up the road."

"Where did you come from?"

"Near Ocean City," I answered.

"You want a bag of chips?"

"Sure."

"How is it?" he asked.

"How is what?" I replied.

"Walking," he said.

"Probably a lot like driving a chip truck," I said. "Some days it's tough, and some days it's the most beautiful thing in the world."

He shook his head. "Out walking the earth . . . How are you on change?"

"I'm OK."

He smiled and jumped back into his truck, still shaking his head.

I walked up the road eating the chips and thinking, "*OK on change? I have seven cents.* But I was OK — or, at least, I had been before I'd realized I could be better off.

I HAD this question: Did I experience fear around money because I had too little of it, or because I had too many desires? When I had excess money, did I create more things to want and subsequently become worried about obtaining them? This dilemma provided another opportunity for inquiry. I used my life, myself as the subject.

In my travels along the road, people would often tell me, "You know, I've always wanted to give away everything I have, just leave it all and take off with no thought of coming back. But I have just a few more years on my pension," or, ". . . my kid is almost out of school," or, ". . . I'm in debt."

"But here," they'd say, "take twenty dollars. I love what you're doing."

Like this, money would come, and though at the time I didn't really need it, turning it down seemed to offend the giver. The money also gave me an opportunity to find out how rarely it brought me a true sense of security. Some days I would give away all the money I had, to see if the absence of it made me miserable. It didn't. Rather, the giving opened up my mind and heart to an abundance that exists regardless of whether one has money or not. It seems that, unless we give up the psychological hold on what we think is ours, we don't see the bounty all around us. So I made a guideline for myself if I forgot the abundance that I was amidst: I would spend any money I was given or had found by the end of the day; otherwise I would pass it on to another.

Adhering to the guideline wasn't always easy. At times I still found security in the knowledge that I could duck into a coffee shop for a snack or to sit when it was rainy and cold. I was certainly grateful for the money and the opportunities it provided, but if I ran out of things to spend it on, I would end up buying chips and sodas and other items that I didn't need.

After a year and a half, having found that one can live a full and rich life without working, and without money, I would do odd jobs for a nominal fee a few days a month,

every few months. In no city across America was I unable to make thirty dollars in a matter of hours.

FROM the mountains of North Carolina, I had made it as far as Chicago. A wonderful person I met there arranged for me to stay in an apartment near Loyola University. I had only a couple of dollars and some change, but it was enough to buy some beans, rice, and flour at a little Mexican market a few blocks away. After two months of walking, this arrangement was a glorious gift. I spent my days swimming, writing, and talking with people by the lake.

Many college students lived in the building, and as I left each day to go down to the water, I would pass the dumpsters slowly. Often I would find something there that I could use, like a perfectly good flannel shirt or a laundry-detergent box with soap still in it.

I had a dollar in my pocket that I had been saving since I'd arrived in the city. It is one thing to have no money on the road or in the woods, but in a city you can't legitimately go into a store or coffee shop without at least a dollar. If I had no money and someone invited me out, I couldn't go without saying right off the bat that I couldn't pay. With a dollar, however, I could at least buy someone a soda and sit and talk. So for this new city dweller, the difference between having a dollar and having no money was a big one.

One morning I left the apartment on my way to the lake. I walked by the dumpster and took a glance, but there were just some old books, a computer monitor, and a wooden chair. I walked on.

"Hey, you got a dollar I can have?" a man asked me in front of McDonald's. "I'm trying to get a burger."

Damn, I thought. "Buddy," I said, "I have one dollar left, and I need it. It's my last dollar."

He looked at me like: *Yeah. Your last dollar bill. Sure.* I appeared well-fed and rested from my stay in the apartment, much different from when I was out walking the roads. But I felt quite righteous, because at least I was telling the truth.

I walked up the street and crossed Lincoln Avenue. On my way through Loyola's courtyard, I got to thinking. I had told myself that if anyone at all asked me for money, I would give it away, regardless of what situation I was in. I had given away all my money before and had never experienced hardship. In fact I had encountered the opposite. And look at me now, all fat and happy with food for a week and a nice pullout bed to sleep on, yet I clung to that dollar bill as if I would have had nothing without it. There was probably only one place in Chicago where I could have bought a soda for a dollar anyway. And that man, even if he was only going to buy a beer with it, needed the dollar more than I.

I turned around and dashed back to McDonald's, but the man was gone.

Later in the afternoon, on my way back to the apartment, I felt lighter, clearer. Even though I hadn't given away my last dollar bill, it had lost its significance. When I passed the dumpster again, I saw the books where they had been earlier. There were four of them. Now that I

wasn't clinging to what little I had left, I saw them clearly. They were college textbooks, and I was near several college bookstores. I grabbed the books, went to the nearest bookstore, and sold them back for forty-two dollars. Lots of people asked me for money as I walked through Chicago that week, and I had a blast taking them out for pizza and sodas.

I WAS walking through a small town on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. It was six in the morning and still dark. I walked into a small corner diner that had a picture of a laughing Jesus on the wall. "I've never seen one of these," I said to the native woman behind the counter. "I like it."

She looked at my road-worn clothes and ruffled hair. "Sit down," she said. "I will fix you whatever you want."

I ate a couple of eggs, some toast and potatoes, and a cup of coffee. Then I thanked her very much and left. A block up the street, I felt a faint tug on my jacket. I turned and saw the woman.

"Here, take this," she said, and she stuffed a roll of bills into my hand. "I can't go where you are going, so I give this to you. I know you will use it for what life is all about." Her hand was trembling.

I accepted the money. I knew it was a tremendous amount for this woman who ran a little breakfast place: \$120, the exact amount I needed to live in Laos and teach English for the winter. I walked up the street and wept to myself at what moves us.

FOR the first few days I was walking, I would look for a comfortable place to sleep before the sun went down. This became too much work, however, and I ceased to concern myself with finding a secluded hideaway. Rather, I just walked until I was tired. A place inevitably showed up that suited my needs: a school bus, the back of a truck, a church, a gazebo behind a town hall, under a poncho in someone's backyard, behind a vfw lodge, a cemetery, an emergency room, the woods, a truck stop, the bushes in front of a college dormitory. Every night a new place, new people, a new environment.

I awoke when there was just enough light for me to know that it was the sun and not the moon. Because I had no watch, I did not know precisely how long I had slept. At times I walked for several days and nights straight, sleeping perhaps an hour or two every twenty-four hours, and I remained quite alert and awake. Sleep, it seems, is not as necessary when I'm alert in body and mind as it is when I am only half living and resisting a good bit of life.

Sometimes, as I lay beneath a structure or some thick brush to sleep, my body would sense: *This is not a safe place to doze off.* Other times I would be awakened from a deep sleep by some voice inside saying, *Wake up!* I would open my eyes and find a man prowling around or an animal right next to my head.

In a house, behind locked doors, these senses may be dulled, but in the woods or on the streets alone, it seems there is another eye or ear that attunes itself to danger.

An outlook of pure curiosity and receptivity is also a defense against danger. When I am not afraid and don't

desire anything, I perceive not imagined dangers, but facts. For as a person wants nothing in the future, but rather lives entirely in the moment, he or she is already dead in one sense, and thus vitally alive. With such a clear view, one can see exactly what to do, often before the danger ever manifests. And with an unfaltering receptivity, one taps into that which is harmless in others.

IT WAS 105 degrees at 1:30 in the afternoon. I was walking down the coast of Virginia, on my way to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. A car pulled up, and the power window hummed down. I could feel the cool air spilling out of the car. "You want a ride?" the driver asked.

"Sure."

He was about sixty-five years old and 240 pounds, with thick, hairy arms. I'd lost twenty pounds from the heat and my light diet. I must have looked like a schoolboy.

Unlike most drivers who picked me up, this man didn't ask what I was doing out along the highway. The cool air inside the car was so alluring I didn't think much about it.

He said he was going to the next town, about fifteen miles up the road. "You know," he said, "there are two great bodies of water on either side of this road: the Chesapeake Bay to the right of us, and the ocean to the left."

The statement struck me as awkward and calculated.

"Would you like to see the bay?" he asked. "It's only a mile or so down the road there."

"No thanks," I said. "I've seen the bay before."

"Let me just take you down there," he said. "It's only a mile or so, and it passes through a nice historic town." He turned right. "See, up the road there you can see the bay."

"Yeah, it's great. Thanks," I said, now curious as to what he was up to.

"Do you want to go and take a closer look?"

"Nah, this is good. Like I said, I've seen the bay many times."

"Where would you like to go now?"

"Back to the main road is good for me."

"Would you like to see the ocean?" he said.

"No thanks. I've seen enough of the ocean the last few days."

So he drove on and turned back onto the main highway going south. About ten miles on, he passed through the town where he'd said he was going. "You can drop me off anywhere," I said.

"Aren't you enjoying the ride?"

"Yeah, I appreciate it."

"You certainly look like you're enjoying the ride. It's nice and cool in the car, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's nice. I appreciate it."

Then he said, "How about we go down one of these little roads, and I'll pay you twenty dollars to let me suck your dick?"

"Ah, I appreciate the offer," I said, "but no thanks."

He became anxious and began driving faster. "You had no trouble taking the ride; did you? You like the AC on a hot day, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, "I appreciate all that. I just don't want

you to suck my dick, and I don't really need twenty dollars."

"You can't have a lot of money walking down the side of the road like this," he said. "Twenty dollars will buy you a few nice meals, maybe a hotel room."

"Well, you know, I'm used to having no money, and I'm just walking. It may seem strange to you, but it's normal for me."

He was starting to become angry and looked offended by my remark.

"Look, friend," I said, "you were great to pick me up and take me down the road on a hot day and all. There are not many folks who would offer a ride to someone, so I thank you, and I'm going to ask you to let that be the end of it."

He said, "Would you take twenty dollars to just dance in front of me naked, no touching?" He was breathing hard, as if in anticipation.

"That is nice of you," I said, "but there is nothing in the world you could say or do to make me go along with any deal. I just enjoy walking up the road. That's all."

"What is it? The money?" he asked. "What about thirty dollars?"

I knew all of his propositions would be only the beginning once we got down one of those isolated, tree-lined roads. I looked at him directly, and I suddenly felt for the man. *He occupies his days with this?* I thought. He appeared so desperate, so lonely. He seemed to need to know that he had power. Without words, I conveyed to him that he did. I silently let him know, *You got me, friend. I am in your car. You weigh eighty pounds more than me. We're going sixty miles an hour.* At the same time I silently asked him to let me slide on this one.

I was amazed by his coercive techniques. He used a dominating tone and had a look of hidden violence to him. I thought about how intimidating this situation would be for a child, or someone who desperately needed the money.

Still, he stopped the car just the same.

"Thanks so much," I said cheerfully as I bowed out of the car. He mumbled something, and his tires squealed as he drove off.

I WAS walking to a small village along the Mexican Gulf Coast. It was another full day's walk along a dirt road through the mountains and the jungle. Night was coming on. I decided to hole up and sleep somewhere. On the edge of a small town was a stage where musicians and dancers could perform. It was covered with a tarp with an opening at one end. I slipped under the stage and onto a small platform beneath it, where I curled up against the tarp for the night.

I was awakened by the sound of men talking beside the opening I had crawled through to get under the stage. I knew only a few words of Spanish, but I could tell they were talking about me. Two of them glanced over in my direction. They looked pretty big. I heard them walk around the outside of the stage. As they did, one jabbed his elbow into the tarp and struck my back. They made another pass and again pushed on the tarp where my back

was up against it.

Here we go, I thought. They sounded drunk, and it was unlikely I could reason with them. I had to do something. With no clear plan in mind, I began to act.

I moved around clumsily behind the tarp, making loud grunts and snorts like a bear. Then I stomped across the lower platform and leapt in the air and shouted, "Hola!" as though I were insane: my arms spread wide, eyes big, mouth open. I jumped through the air at them, and they took off in separate directions. As I landed I yelled out again, "Hola, amigos!"

I found a different place to sleep for the rest of the evening.

WHILE staying in Chicago, I enjoyed taking a swim in the lake just before sunset. One evening as I emerged from the waves, I saw a group of teenage boys gathered on the shore, posturing for a fight.

The seven boys had slipped through a fence and positioned themselves on some rocks. Five of them circled two, laughing and goading them on. One of the fellows in the middle obviously didn't want to fight. His opponent was bigger and had a fierce look in his eyes. The bigger one grew bolder with the taunts from the crowd, while the shorter, pudgier one became more nervous. The pair put their chests up against each other and began pushing.

It was late, and not many people were on the beach. My shirt was about eight feet from the activity. The boys glanced over at me in the water. I pretended not to notice them while I considered my options. Here on their neck of the beach, I felt aware of my whiteness.

The big one slapped the small one's face. The crowd oohed. The small one pushed the big one. The big one smacked him again. The circle closed in tighter.

I began walking toward my shirt. *Just walk up*, I told myself. *Words will come*.

One of the boys piped up. "What do you want? Why don't you get your ass out of here?"

"I will. I was just watching you guys from the water there, and I couldn't let you be cheating here in this fight."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, fighting on these jagged rocks here, that isn't fighting. This is nothing." I still didn't know what I was going to say. "I mean, if one of you slips or something and cracks your head on a rock, it's just an accident. No one wins. If you want to fight — I mean, if you really want to knock the crap out of each other — come out here onto the sand. That's fighting. Here you can crack someone's head with a fist or an elbow."

I flung my elbow into my palm with a pop. The boys jerked back a bit. The bigger of the two fighters tapped one of his buddies and said, "Man, let's go. This motherfucker weird." They turned and walked up the beach. I picked up my shirt and dried off. I don't think they really wanted to fight, anyway. They just needed a reason not to.

THE decision to have nothing forced me to reexamine many ideologies that I was afraid to let go of, including health insurance and retirement savings. To have either, I

had to have sustainable employment. The fear of losing this safety net was great. This fear adversely affected my health and lessened my excitement for growing old at all. It was keeping me from doing what I love.

A year before I set out walking, I canceled my health-insurance policy. On that day I became 100 percent responsible for anything that happened to me. The moment I claimed this responsibility, I began to see danger or potential problems before they occurred. In the four years since then, I have had only a few ailments, and those were healed through my own resolve. Many people tell me that with my erratic diet, I am not taking care of my body. I have to disagree with them, and have only my own health and wealth of energy to prove it.

I had worked for ten years. During that time I put money into IRAs for my retirement. Now, as I planned to leave all that I knew, I was faced with the choice of not planning for my financial future at all. I considered this decision for some time.

Ultimately I've found that the less I concern myself with my future, the more the future takes care of itself. The less attention I give to fears of growing old, the more my mind opens, and the more value I am to others.

It seems to me that enjoying oneself completely, to the degree that others also share a true sense of joy, is the best retirement plan. It is also the best insurance against becoming isolated or a burden upon others in old age. To put off being dedicated to one's heart and mind until later is a sure way to need a great deal of retirement benefits and insurance.

WALKING through Wisconsin with fall coming on, I thought it best to head for warmer climates. In exchange for a few days' work, a man who owned a canoe-rental shop gave me a canoe. I floated down the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi, moving south with the current.

From my campsite on a sandbar fifteen feet above the Mississippi, I could hear what sounded like a drum in the middle of the night. It was a loud banging and pounding, moving up the river. I put my head to the tent screen. Through the blackness and the fog emerged the lights of fifteen commercial barges pushed by a tug. The train of barges passed by, and I fell back to sleep.

As the sun rose and I cooked rice and heated water for oatmeal, I heard the sound again, drumming and knocking along with the current. This time the fog was so dense I could see only about three feet past the water's edge. The far end of my canoe, which was pulled up on the sand, disappeared into a thick white cloud resting on top of the water. *Nothing stops the merchandise from moving*, I thought.

Two days earlier, I'd seen fourteen recreational motorboats on the river. I'd watched houseboats, jet skis, and speedboats going back and forth just for fun. The people in the boats looked at me as if I were an extinct animal. They peered through their binoculars and pointed so that their children could see the man in the canoe. These were not even our country's richest people. These were working-class Midwesterners.

Americans sure know how to have fun and burn a lot

of gas doing it. Is this what we are prepared to kill for, this way of life? Do we really need all these toys to find joy? So few in the world have these luxuries, yet we Americans defend them as our rights, our freedoms. I wondered if we would be so concerned with these “recreations” if we were truly free.

When the fog had lifted somewhat, I slipped into the canoe and headed out on the river. Barges as big as stadiums would sneak up on me, as the splashing of my paddle masked the sound of their engines. If I didn't keep my head up and my eyes open, I would find the huge, flat, sheet-metal fronts of the barges bearing down on me.

As the fog dissipated, the face and body of the Mississippi appeared, ignited by the sun. Trees in the distance looked like broccoli, and the water was as blue as the sky. I heard yet another tug and barge coming up from behind me, this one filled with coal. It was a smaller, local tug. But its wake was much larger than the others. Until then I had turned the front end of the canoe into the wake to avoid being toppled by the two-to-three-foot waves. This time I tried a new move. I paddled alongside the tug that pushed the barge. I was within thirty-five feet when the first wave of its wake hit the back end of my canoe. I leaned back and surfed the wave until it would carry me no farther. The second wave picked me up and did the same. One after another the waves came from behind the back of the tug and pushed me down the river. From then on, I looked forward to all tugs coming from the north. What use was it to fight?

AFTER eight days canoeing alone down the Wisconsin River, I pulled my canoe into the brush near McGregor, Iowa, close to where the Wisconsin and the Mississippi Rivers come together. It was there, a week after the rest of the world, that I heard of the planes crashing into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

Days later, I drifted with the current and thought about the new somberness of the small towns along the river. I thought of the dramatic images of the silver towers in flames. I thought of the frustrated individuals who had carried this out, and of the ones who would retaliate against it. I thought, *Am I one of these humans who are capable of such violence?* Then I thought of the peaceful mornings on the lower Wisconsin River — the evening coyote cries, the turtles dropping from the rocks, the herons flying from the shallow water — and it all seemed that much more beautiful.

As the day wore on, my thoughts turned to dinner. I had only a small cup of rice. The river was at least a mile wide at this point, with tall rock bluffs on both sides. There was no place to go ashore. Up ahead I spotted a shiny object in the water. I paddled against the wind and caught up to it. It was a large perch, floating belly up. I rarely ate meat anymore, but this creature was already dead, and had been for just a short time. I thought of my meager cup of rice.

I made a few passes at the floating fish before I snatched it. It was bigger than I'd thought, about three pounds, and had lost the scales on one side of its body, probably in the act of breaking free from a fisherman's net.

I spotted a sandbar in the middle of the river and stopped there to fillet the fish with my dull Swiss Army knife. As I cut the head from the body, its heart dropped into my hand, small, soft, and smooth. The fish was still so close to living, the heart seemed to have just come to rest.

When I was done, I had two beautiful white strips of fish. I spent the next few hours paddling downriver, excited about how to cook it: fried, boiled, pan-seared, in a soup? I passed some fishermen on the bank who yelled, “There's a storm coming in.” I looked back. Sure enough, the skies were blackening. I quickened my pace, hoping to outrun the rain and find a campground where I could cook the fish. It would be edible for only a few more hours, as I had no way to keep it cool. I paddled faster, digging deep into the water with each stroke.

To the right of me the skies were a dark purple. A bolt of lightning flashed upriver. From behind I could see a sheet of rain coming down the valley. I was surrounded by storms. The fish lay in two pieces under my seat. Then I saw my destination in the distance: Mud Lake County Park. The park was aptly named; the water around it was thick with mud and algae. The canoe moved like a snail through the growth, each paddle stroke throwing up roots and leaves. With thunder to the right and lightning in front of me, I paddled through the marsh to the boat ramp, yanked the canoe onto the cement, grabbed the fish and a frying pan, and raced over to the pavilion. The rain was just beginning to fall as I snatched some sticks and brush and built a fire in a grill.

I had two matches left. The rain came down harder. I lit the first match, set an envelope on fire, and put it under the wood. Huge drops of rain extinguished the flame. I sensed the futility of my effort, but I just couldn't quit. As I went to light the second match, the raindrops smothered it. There was nothing else to be done. The fish would go to waste. The tin pan with the fish fillets lay on top of the picnic table in a zip-lock bag.

The storms were on top of me now. I sat on one of the picnic tables, wrapped in a blanket. The image of the shiny fish with its beautiful silver scales merged in my mind with the images of the planes going into the silver towers. Lives lived and lost, for what reason? Why so much hatred when we are capable of living in such beauty?

I wept. *It's just a fish*, I thought, but I let the sadness come. Nature has its own way of making you deal with things. I felt so insignificant amid the wind, thunder, and lightning. It seemed that more was on its way.

The fish landed with a thud in the bottom of an empty dumpster.

IN THIS act of doing nothing but walking, with no apparent ambition, I was often confronted by the thought that I was making no contribution to society. I produced nothing for the economy, helped no one, and used not one talent but my ability to walk, which I'd learned by the age of one year. I was disconnected from all family, had no money to give, was building no reputation, and had no plan for the future. Often people viewed me as a threat, a bum, a vagrant, a dropout. At first it was difficult not to believe them. So for a time I perceived myself to be bad.

I walked for weeks with the heightened experience of the pain associated with this thought. The culture seemed to reinforce it. Yet I was curious as to what was on the other side of these thoughts and this pain. I found that, the more I believed myself to be bad, the more I found things to perpetuate this belief. When the clerk at a register looked at me strangely, I felt ashamed, exposed. Sitting on a bench with my pack, I noticed that others regarded me warily and drew their kids closer to them. I shrank inside.

I had nothing to distract me from these pervading thoughts: no TV, no lovely woman, no friend, no work, no comfort, no chemical substance, no family, and no future prospects. Doing nothing more than walking up the gravel shoulder, I experienced these condemning thoughts as pain, pure and simple.

Suddenly the thought arose: *So be bad. And then cease believing that badness is bad, and just be.* This notion that I was bad was as transitory as the idea that I was good. Both are inaccurate — or, rather, as false as they are true. In an instant, the dreary thoughts and uncomfortable sensations in my body were gone.

I didn't help anyone or use my talents. I didn't support the economy or the community, or protest inequity. I didn't renounce my last candy bar and my flour. I did nothing but what I was doing, which, if I was doing anything at all, was being a skeptic of my own thoughts and allowing myself just to be what I was.

In a moment everything was different. I noticed trees shimmering in the breeze and the beauty in people's faces. And they saw in me not a homeless bum, but a reflection of a different part of themselves. There was openness in our interactions. I felt completely alive amid any and all surroundings and company. Pain and disrupting thoughts still came and went, but I was indifferent to them, for I saw that none of them was entirely accurate or believable. Realizing this, I walked for the play of it, for the liberty of it.

IN THE morning as the sun rose, I would follow the monks through the Thai village, walking some six feet behind them while they begged for food. We moved in silence along the dusty village roads. I carried a bag to hold the donated food, while the monks carried their begging bowls. The dirt roads felt soft and cool under my bare feet. The villagers would bring their sticky rice baskets out to the street. They would lean over, to be lower than the monks, and place a handful or so of rice in each alms bowl. Some would put fruits and bags of vegetables and soy milk in the bowls as well. These donations, along with food brought directly to the monastery each morning, were what the monks ate for their single meal each day.

Every morning, as the monks made their rounds, we would pass a large chicken coop with chickens clucking and scratching about inside it. The wood-and-wire-mesh structure was the size of a small house. Inside it, the chickens' heads bobbed above a white cloud of bodies. Some poked at the wire fence and at the corners where the mesh joined the wood posts. The chickens were jammed into the coop, and the smell was terrible. Each time I walked by, I thought about them getting bigger in order to

die.

One morning a lone chicken was outside of the coop. Somehow it had managed to escape through the fencing. It was free!

But the chicken was concerned only with how to get back in. It scrambled around the front of the coop, pecking at the fence and posts. It wanted to be with its fellow chickens, even though the conditions were miserable. The chickens inside clucked louder as they watched the free bird peck.

I pointed it out to one of the monks. He said, "Funny. Like us."

WALKING the back roads of America, I was often met with enthusiasm by people of the Christian faith. They allowed me to sleep in their homes or churches and eat dinner at their tables. We shared lively dialogue and a reverence for this life. And from some I waited for the inevitable question "Are you born again?"

I found it curious, this focus on the experience of being born again, as if it were a single turning event. I found no answer that accurately satisfied the question. If I answered yes, because I felt the same love that they did, then they assumed I was a member of their faith and therefore separate from all those who disbelieved or believed something else. If I answered no, because I was not one of them exclusively, then the questioners felt compelled to convince me of the importance of their beliefs — and to frighten me by telling me what was in store if I didn't believe exactly as they did. I usually fell back on philosophical banter before becoming reacquainted with the benefits of silence.

Many ministers, priests, and elders have met me with open hearts and open doors, while others have provided me with amusement by their poverty of spirit. But then I question my assumption that they should be kind or open to me at all simply because of their position in such an organization. When gentleness did occur in a church pastor or member, it gave me a lift, and I was glad to know that a congregation also benefited from this person's kind nature.

It was refreshing to attend church in an American small town and see someone sifting through the offering plate, looking for change for a dollar or five or ten. The Buddhists also made change from the offering plate. Some things, it seems, are universal.

In Thailand I was invited to a feast at a Buddhist temple. I enjoyed the scent of the salt air off the sea, the aroma of incense, the birds singing in the banana trees. The village people had beautiful brown faces and dark eyes with brilliant whites. We all shared in the food. The children ran and chased one another. A few men congregated around picnic tables, sipping cheap whiskey. One could see gentleness in their careful touches on the shoulder.

A villager who spoke English asked me, "Are you Buddhist?" When I said no, the person told the others nearby. Their faces became serious. No longer could they enjoy themselves. They felt they had to tell me of the precepts. They had to act more "Buddhist" toward me. No

longer could we enjoy the beauty that was already there, that was already Buddhist.

STARVATION is not much of a concern in the West, but beneath the surface, at a very base level, is the fear that one will go hungry. We're also afraid of losing our homes, our reputations, our loved ones. Ultimately, we fear death. These fears have us act in ways that, over time, burden us to the point where we live either a grave or a superficial life.

I had set out to see for myself what happened when one goes forward alone into uncertainty without a reliable source of food, among other things. While I was walking through Rhode Island, hunger left me. For four days, no thought of eating emerged. Though four days is, for many, not a long time to go without, it was enough to show me that lack of food is nothing to fear. As fear and want diminish, the drive to eat dissipates, and one is filled with spirit alone.

There are fine treats to be found along a road, however, and I do not wish to resist an apple from a tree. It is like an explosion of all tastes at once. It is a paradise of sorts. When I see the fallen apples, bruised and squashed on the road, my spirits fly. I use them to knock down others from the branches as I dodge the cars flying by. After five or six fall, I fill my pockets and continue walking up the road, chewing them one after another. It is all so lovely. One may say that I am homeless, but actually my home is all of this.

I WAS walking up Highway 221 outside Spruce Pine, North Carolina, having just eaten a piece of pizza and a granola bar, when a man driving by shouted, "Where you going?"

"Linville," I said.

He pulled onto the shoulder. As I approached the car, I noticed a baby in the back and a woman in the passenger seat. The driver said, "Look, man, we're real short on cash, and we ain't got any gas. If you got ten bucks, I'll take you up the road to Linville Falls. It's only about fifteen miles up."

I looked at the baby and said, "Here's ten bucks. Just take it."

"You want a ride, though, don't you? Linville isn't that far. We can take you up and then come back. Come on."

"Sure," I said. "That would be great."

The woman moved to the back, and I sat up front. We drove a mile or so to a gas station, where the man put five dollars' worth of gas in the car and bought a pack of Marlboro reds and three Cokes. "Take one," he said, offering me a soda. Off we drove to Linville Falls.

He said he was a roofer, and work had been a little slow. "We haven't been able to pay the bills," he said. "We're living in Beech Bottom now, in a trailer." He was twenty-two years old, and he and his wife had been together for six years. They had a nine-month-old baby girl.

His wife spoke up from the back seat: "You think that's bad; we got another on the way. I'm three months

pregnant."

When we arrived at Linville, he said, "Hell, I'll take you on into the park."

"I don't want to burn up all your gas," I said.

"Naw, it's only a few more miles up the road. It is a great place. My daddy and I used to go fishing down in the gorge. I'll show it to you from the top."

He drove up the old mountain road. It was a lot farther than a couple of miles. I watched as the gas gauge dropped close to EMPTY.

We stopped at a scenic overlook near the top of the mountain. I gave the man a couple of more bucks for gas. We looked down into the gorge, and the man told me how his daddy used to take him camping up in the woods there. He said those were some of the best memories he had of childhood. He pointed to where they used to fish. "If this next baby is a boy, I hope to take him fishing there too."

We got back in the car and drove out of the park. The man stopped at a convenience store on the way back through Linville. He went in and bought two more cans of Coke. The store didn't have any milk, he told his wife when he returned.

"Here, give me the money," she said. She went in and bought a grape Nehi and proceeded to put it in the baby's bottle. It fizzed as she poured it.

The husband said, "Maybe we'd better not give it to her."

The wife said, "Well, she's got to drink." The baby turned her head from the nipple. "Oh, now, don't not drink it just 'cause it's purple," the wife said.

We drove on. The gas needle was below where it had been when they had picked me up. "You know," I said, "this is perfect for me right here. Thanks a lot." They let me out.

Walking up the road, I wondered if they thought they had made any progress at all that day. If the baby could have talked, I was certain she would have thanked me for not giving her parents any more money.

HAVE you ever met a free woman? Have you ever been in one's presence for just a moment? Are they not the most beautiful beings, and also the most frightening? For in their presence, if a man identifies with fear, he is insignificant. With a free woman, a man must face himself, and this can be too much for the psyche. I have seen only glimmers of such women before they revert back into someone more safe and palatable for mankind.

A friend and I went to a dance club in town. It was a gay club, and a woman in the place was a rare bird, but on this night, a woman conspicuously approached the dance floor, followed by three friends. She was a bit standoffish, as women who rely on their beauty for too long often are. I was reluctant to approach her, so I continued to dance alone, glancing occasionally in her direction. She looked isolated from everyone around her. I thought, *What a waste. Sure, she's beautiful, but why so unapproachable?* Clearly she wasn't enjoying herself behaving in such a manner. Or perhaps I was merely intimidated by her physical beauty. I decided to make this my question for the evening.

As male dancers moved powerfully on platforms, dollar bills hanging from their g-strings, I danced closer to the woman and her friends. They made it clear that I was not going to invade their circle, so I danced contentedly around the outskirts. Then two of the women wandered away, leaving my friend dancing with one and me dancing near the woman who so intrigued me.

She wore a tiny top and faded bluejeans and was not the slightest bit concerned with making eye contact. I could tell that she liked my being there, though. She moved closer and kind of nestled up against me. We were moving in time, bodies pressed gently together, my hands resting on her hips. She took one of my hands and moved it onto her stomach. Then, just as quickly as she had moved up against me, she pulled away and went back to her friends.

The next song had the two of us dancing and touching again. She was dancing with her hands clasped above her head, as she had for most of the night. I moved my hands up to hers, to draw them apart. I sensed a moment of fear in her, but then it passed. One of her hands held mine, while the other ended at the wrist in a tiny ball with two nubs on either end. She allowed it to rest in my hand. She looked at me as if to ask if it was ok. I smiled and gently moved her arms down. I held her waist and she held mine. Her standoffishness disappeared, and both our facades dropped. I realized how much work it had been to keep them up. As we danced, her attempts to be sexy dissolved, and she became just herself, entirely beautiful. I could see her friends in the background watching the spot where her invisible hand moved in the air with mine. Love jumped between us, a love that wanted nothing: no phone number, no tomorrow, just contact amid the night's otherness.

ALL around the northern highlands of Laos, where I'd come to teach English, were splotches of land the size of a pond or a large putting green where no vegetation grew. They marked the places where U.S. planes had unloaded their bombs on suspected Viet Cong positions before landing across the border in Thailand.

On my way into a cafe, I nearly bumped into a woman who worked there. I stopped and spoke with her. Her name was Li.

"I have not met an American since the war," Li said.

"How old were you during the war?" I asked.

"I was born in April of 1969," she said.

"I was born in April 1969, too."

"Will you come with me this afternoon after my work?" she said. "I wish to show you something across the river."

"Sure."

She acted as if she was hiding something. I thought it odd but looked forward to our meeting.

Later in the afternoon we took a canoe across the river and walked up the bank. We cut through the woods and stood at the entrance to a cave. "I brought you a flashlight," she said.

We turned on our flashlights and descended into the cave. The ground was slick, and I couldn't get any footing. Li, however, shimmied up the inclines and down the slopes

with ease. She came back and helped me deeper into the cave, farther from the light of the opening. When we got to a large chamber, she stopped.

"I wanted to bring you here and show you," she said. "This is a cave where the Lao people came and hid during the war. In North Vietnam, where I am from, I lived in a cave like this for nearly four years. Right after my birth, I went into the cave with my mother. There were many of us living in it, almost my whole family. The rest of my family was in another cave about forty kilometers to the north. Some of your soldiers came and discovered that cave and the people in it. They put rocks at the entrance and put explosives in the cave and blew it up. More than fifty people were killed."

Li counted on her fingers the relatives she'd lost in that blast: "Two sisters, my uncle, my grandfather, my aunt . . . You are the first American I have met since I saw soldiers going through the fields when I was a child. I am North Vietnamese. I am not supposed to be here in Laos. I snuck across the border to work. If I am caught, I will get in trouble. I will be sent back, for sure. I know English very well. But, I think, there is not as much opportunity for people who speak English in North Vietnam, so I snuck over the border to live and work here."

She said, "My teacher taught English to many of us who lived in the village. Three years ago, she was — how do you say? — picking weeds, in her garden by her house. She picked a weed, and an explosion went off, and now she has no sight or hearing. She lost her hand. She cannot teach anymore. Many of us, her old students, work where we can and send her money so that she can live."

We went outside and sat in the sun. "So much anger I have had toward the Americans," Li said. "So much hatred I have had. I had no idea what I would do if I saw one again. But I hoped that I would."

Here was a woman born five days earlier than me, yet our lives were so different. I didn't even remember much of the war, except a few images on tv. I put my hand on her back. The heat of her burned my palm through her jacket. I felt branded by her. I said I was sorry for her losses. I said we Americans are naive about the impact of war. She felt as vulnerable as a bird beneath my hand. Her eyes teared up. She put her face in her hands.

I looked behind us at the cave, which went far into the side of the hill. The brown waters of the Mekong River moved slowly below. What wild terrain it was: thick jungles, vines, tall bamboo. Li lifted her head and looked across the river.

"Many Americans lost their lives in the fields by my village." She was quiet again. "Will you study English with me for a while?" she asked. "I always want to learn. I like to learn."

I had with me photocopies of a few Mary Oliver poems. I brought out one about a grasshopper. Li read it out loud.

On the way back to the canoe, her face glowed a beautiful color. She laughed and hopped lightly down the rocks and the mud path. In the boat, we watched the sun go down over the rich green mountains along the Mekong.

