

Zen Highway

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Feel Like A Number by Bob Segar rattled across the speakers as I slowly navigated around the jutting rocks on the gravel road leading to the peak of Whitetop Mountain. It's a place I often go to find a little peace of mind when the daily grind catches up to my ol' wretched soul. It's a world full of cubicles, Facebook, and nonsense, my friends! How in the hell we ever figure out who we really are is beyond me, I tell ya'.

That's no small thing to say, either. I've read Whitman, Hemmingway, and even that creepy Stephen King! I've found no real answers that satisfied my own spirit, that so-called call of the wild. I suspect we all sort of feel this way, but most of us don't do anything about it. We forget all about it when our favorite show comes on. I've been looking for *it* for years, that place inside where I lose myself and find myself. I guess we collectively gave up on our core humanity in exchange for a cubicle, a steady paycheck to live week to week, a cell phone to peck at all day, and social media to pretend to be who we wish we were. It's a crazy depraved age of man, I tell ya'!

Emerson warned that for nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. Well hell, the herd mentality is nothing new. So why does it feel so good to take that path least traveled even though we're scared as hell to do it? That's only one of a million questions I ask myself as I sit looking out across the mountains, searching for my zen moment.

I sat for a while admiring the mountains and blue sky and sipped bourbon from a flask. But I found my mind raging about what I should do, or how to be happy. It was as if my mind was trying to convince me that I needed to cross some kind of finish line, to win some sort of self-

manufactured race just to feel like an important person in this dance we all call life. Could I work harder than my cousin Steve down in those coal mines? Could I beat the sales numbers of my friend David who works at a brokerage firm in a city a few hours away from here? Well, that's how everyone else tells me I need to be. Either stay here and get your hands dirty or get far away where I can put that college degree to some reasonable use. It's hard to stay, sometimes harder to leave.

I think too much. I hate when that happens. Really I do! We let our thoughts and a busy mind be our own worst enemy. Have you ever noticed that? I might be what most call a simple fellow from the Appalachians but I am smart enough to realize *that*. Imagine how much money I wasted on college to learn nothing of substance in life!! Now that, my friend, is stupid.

I sat there and tried to empty my mind. Have you ever tried to do that? It's a lot harder than you think. Go ahead, give it a try. I dare you! Try to not have a thought for twenty seconds. Not one single thought, you understand.

Whitetop should be the perfect place to clear your mind and forget your troubles but I reflected on how life in these parts was no easy task. Never has been for anyone. Especially for a guy like me that only had a few qualities he could call skills, none of which were in any kind of demand among these hard mountains. Hell, if sipping cold beer and reading countless books on philosophy were worth anything I'd be a King. Not around here, though.

In fact, what is an imaginative mind even worth? Anything? I figured it was time to take a road trip and find out.

I figured that a journey in search of wisdom probably required a few things. First of all, it required some good company, or as close to it as I could get. I stopped by and recruited my friends Kesey and Bunker for this unplanned and likely chaotic trip across the Commonwealth.

Kesey and Bunker would no doubt add some variety to this trip as we are all three very different people. Bunker is the glass barely half empty one of our small spontaneous tribe. He's not a pessimist, but he's the first to point out how reason and common sense can be a real drag when you're looking for more fun than you should morally be searching for. He's a real piece of work, Bunker. He reads his Bible often and curses like a fiend from hell. A real paradox, that one! Kesey, on the other hand, was about as relaxed as a human being could get. Hell, if he were any more relaxed he'd turn into a cat. Of that much I was solidly convinced. With Kesey and Bunker on board I had a radical combination of godless stoic and Bible thumping hell raiser to balance out my journey to find some answers.

The first order of business was to pack for the trip. With little money, my unemployed pals and I had to be as frugal as we could be and pack lightly. None of us were the type to be bothered with luggage. We'd done the same on many a road trip before.

Kesey took only ten minutes to pack. He took two bottles of rum, a flask, a sleeping bag, a light jacket, a paperback copy of a Tolle book, and a notebook filled with notes and questions. For a guy that was stuck between a rock and a hard place both socially and financially he sure seemed awkwardly happy. Perhaps I'd find a few answers from that wily bastard before the trip was over.

"Are you not taking any food? Maybe a loaf of bread and peanut butter. We're not going to have enough money to stop and eat fast food very often," I said.

“Nah. Bunker is a pack rat with the mentality of a doomsday survivalist. He frets over the politics of the day too damn much. I’ll eat his food. I’m sure he’ll bring enough to make sure he keeps us alive in case zombies suddenly pepper the landscape or the criminals in Washington decide to declare martial law and suppress our liberties.”

Bunker packed a couple changes of clothes, his Bible, a dozen cans of ravioli, a loaf of bread, peanut butter, some bottled water, and two cases of beer. He really could put them away, I tell ya! Rumor had it that the last mosquito to bite him ended up spending time at the Betty Ford Clinic. The guy once tried to pass off a twelve pack of Coors as carry on luggage on a flight out of Roanoke.

Bunker was debating the last item to pack as Kesey and I watched him sweat out his choice.

“We’re going to Virginia Beach?” he asked.

“That’s the first stop. Except maybe to take a leak. But you get the point. Straight to the beach to ask the ocean for some wisdom,” I proclaimed.

“You are one odd bird, man. I don’t know why you just don’t find a regular job and go to church like everyone else,” Bunker said as he stared intently at the flip flops he’d tossed on his bed. “Why do you always have to play by your own rules? You work for yourself and half the time you can’t find work. You haven’t had a steady paycheck you can count on in years. I don’t know how you stand it.”

That was an easy answer for me, but one that no one else close to me seemed to understand. I had worked for a major corporation in Cincinnati. I lived in a cubicle for seven long years before I began to search for something better. Not a better job, per se. Just a better life.

I woke one day and noticed, for the first time, how everyone around me was a slave to their own devices. Produce more for that small quarterly bonus and you might be able to pay down

some bills!! Or make your spouse a tad bit happier. We all sat in boxes making no real difference in our lives or the lives of others. Sure, we helped people invest their money more wisely. But did we make their lives any better? Did we reach out to feel the humanity of the voice on the other end of the phone? No, we didn't.

When people weren't chained to a tiny cubicle where they spent the bulk of their lives they were staring at a cell phone, playing around on social media that, in reality, kept you from being truly social with anyone. Or constantly texting instead of calling someone or visiting them to share time together. I noticed people living in their own false realities and rushing through life. After work they all rush home, but not to the lives they should be living. They rush home to a routine where most of the time they sit in front of an electronic box watching more false realities being glorified on television. Just what people do because they don't know what else to do.

Then I realized I was guilty of the same thing. The same nothingness.

I quit.

I went in search of meaning, living and working on my own terms no matter the sacrifice or how painful. In that struggle I found out more of who I was than I did during all those years of a steady paycheck, a healthy retirement plan, and good insurance. I started to find life. It was something that I could feel. It wasn't something that could be explained. I realized that people have to learn that lesson the hard way, just like I did.

"What is it with you and those damn flip flops?" I asked.

"It's a gay thing," Bunker confessed.

That's when Kesey strutted into the room and gave him a soft smack on his behind and blew him a kiss. Leave it to Kesey to find the weakness of another and exploit it.

"Nice try, sweetie," Bunker laughed. "It's not a homophobic thing, exactly."

As it turned out, Bunker in all of his conservative foul-mouthed glory didn't really care about the subject at all. Flip flops, in his twisted mind, represented a crossroad where men sort of embraced a feminine side. If he were in his twenties he'd had no problem wearing them. At his age he just didn't like to let that question linger about him, being a straight unmarried man in his late thirties.

"Well, maybe on this trip you'll embrace your sensitive side, buddy," Kesey joked. "Hell, if you can't be honest with yourself then who can you be honest with?"

I could tell that the trip was going to be interesting as long as politics didn't come up. They would likely tear each other apart. There was no way this trip was going to be boring.

After some prodding and teasing Bunker took the flip flops with him.

Four hundred miles down the Zen Highway, and early the next morning, we planted our tender bare feet in the sand at Virginia Beach and watched as the sun climbed over the horizon. The ocean breeze held us in a cool embrace.

I strolled up the beach a couple of miles, Bunker and Kesey trailing a distance behind. I looked back at them a couple of times and could tell by Bunker's animated body language that the topic of politics had been broached. The foul mouthed religious libertarian and the stoic liberal in a heated discussion that they hoped would solve all of America's problems. That was probably the third or fourth time they had set out on that verbal adventure in the past two weeks.

After some time I spotted an old man with a long gruff looking grey beard sitting in the sand and staring out at the horizon as if he was waiting on a long lost friend. It struck me that maybe he was on a journey searching for answers as well and his fate brought him to this very same spot. I cautiously approached the man and said hello.

After a couple minutes of pleasantries I sat down in the sand next to him and asked what brought him to this secluded part of the beach. As it turned out it was a special place to him. It was the place where he asked his wife to marry him. It was the place where he told her that he was being shipped out for the first time with the Navy. It was also the very spot that she told him they were expecting their first and only child. It was the spot where she sat on the beach and watched as the ships came sailing back home to Norfolk and hoping he was on one of them. It was the spot where she came to reflect after finding out that she had inoperable cancer. The old retired sailor, Hudson, came here often to reflect on his own life and the blessings he had that he felt he never really deserved.

“What brings you men here?” he asked as Bunker and Kesey approached.

“I’m sort of on a journey,” I answered.

“A spiritual one?”

“Not exactly. I seem to be looking for answers that I never seem to find. You know that old poem where you travel along a path and decide to take the one less travelled? Well, that’s sort of the journey I find myself on in life. I thought maybe a road trip from the mountains on the other side of the Commonwealth would lead me to enlightenment. Or at least get me a little closer to it.”

Kesey listened to the discussion intently, occasionally scribbling something down in his notebook.

“Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken. Great poem. That meant a lot to me as a young man when I was headstrong and ready to take on the world. But I’ve been from one side of this world to the other. I’ve seen and experienced all kinds of things. Good and bad. The only thing I

learned was that there aren't many answers out there. Just more questions. Do you want some friendly advice?" the old man asked. I was eager to hear it.

"That road less travelled often leads to a lonely place. Find something you do well and make a living out of it. Settle down and have some kids. Save for tomorrow because life is short."

The old man meant well but conformity did not sound like much of an option for my confused and wretched wandering spirit.

He asked where our journey was taking us next. We didn't have much time but we decided to travel up the coast a bit and see what life presented to us.

He wanted to suggest a couple of places but we didn't have a map to follow his directions.

"No map!"

"No, we didn't plan that far ahead," I said as Kesey and Bunker were walking back down the beach trying to trip each other, one giving the middle finger to the other. By this time Bunker had powered through about a dozen beers and staggered around on the beach like a limp penguin.

"From the looks of you guys I'm not sure you dumbasses could find your way around a Walmart."

Yes'sir, no doubt about it! We were on our way to enlightenment.

We spent most of the day on the beach and were running out of time before we had to begin the drive back. Bunker had to be back for a job interview. Kesey couldn't care less if he went back or not.

We travelled north, stuffing down peanut butter sandwiches and ravioli to settle down our rumbling stomachs. After a short visit to the Naval Museum we found our way to an old blues club and settled in for an hour to listen to some live music before we started on home. By this

time Kesey and Bunker were drunk but not enough so to disrupt everyone having a good time. Hell, the lyrics to one song had Bunker crying quietly like he had been jilted by love.

With what little money I had left I bought the old bluesman a shot of whiskey during his set break and he came back to join us. As it turned out every sad lyric he cried while his guitar moaned and wailed was nothing short of the miserable truth that the man had lived through.

The old man took a special interest in our story and why we were on this trip. He said it was worthy of a blues song. That didn't exactly lift my spirits. He wasn't surprised that we hadn't found many answers about life, purpose and meaning after a few minutes of drinking whiskey with us.

“The real question is, are you asking the right questions?”

For some reason that sounded pretty profound and important, especially in my slightly inebriated state of mind. With that, we slogged down a couple more cans of ravioli and set out on the road until we found a rest stop for truckers and tucked my SUV in between a couple big rigs and grabbed a few hours of sleep.

The next morning we set out on our trip back to the mountains. I had learned a couple of interesting things, but nothing to brag about. It was a fun trip, but it didn't yield the results that I hoped for. It seemed that the influences on this trip still pointed me toward conformity. Toward going along to get along. To avoid that road less travelled. But why? Maybe that was one of the questions that I needed to be asking. Consume. Marry. Fit in. Was that what our humanity and freedom was supposed to be? Was our fate to lose our individualism? To stare at the television and your cell phone all day?

I dropped my friends off and took the last six beers of Bunker's with me. With only a couple hours of daylight left I set out for the peak of Whitetop Mountain once again. I wasn't ready to

go home and sit in front of a television and get lost in the news and national chaos of the day. I wasn't ready for the bluster of vicious politics or tumultuous news. I needed the peace that Whitetop gave, to breathe in the harmony of the mountains, the trails, the spirit of the place.

I was surprised to find that I wasn't alone as I got out of my SUV. A hiker from the Appalachian Trail had made her way here and was sitting in the exact spot that I thought only belonged to me.

She and I spent the next hour sharing the six pack and the silence. We seldom spoke because we didn't want to disrupt the harmony we felt. In the little time we talked I learned that she was a philosopher and a world traveler. This was her third trip across the AT and she volunteered for various organizations around the world for missionary work to assist the poor, the hungry, and to educate children in places that seldom ever heard of schools.

I asked her if she had written any books on philosophy or her journeys.

“Why should I? Most people never listen and I wouldn't waste the time when I can be busy living.”

We sat quietly for a while longer until she got up and gathered her pack. She wanted to make it a couple more miles before setting up camp for the night near Damascus.

“You know, I read somewhere that we deserve our own love and affection. Maybe the Buddha said it. I don't know. But I do remember one thing that I read. I carry it with me in my heart. Mark Twain said that the two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

I wasn't sure what that should mean to me. However, I was certain I'd be back here at this very spot to think about it.

