

My Trip to the Grand Canyon



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When I spoke with friends about the week long trip I was planning to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, all alone, their comments reflected that they thought I was planning a spiritual retreat in the wild.

Enthusiastically, they spoke of the solitude, wonder, calm, quiet grandeur: The time for meditation while seated among Ponderosa and Pinion Pines at the edge of all that history and beauty.

I had been thinking I was just taking a small vacation by myself.

I love the North Rim, and, although Mike and I had a great summer vacation in Colorado, the wildfires all across Arizona and New Mexico had changed many of our original plans. I was frustrated to have missed several planned destinations.

Mike teaches, and we can only vacation together during the summer. So, while driving back to Austin from Colorado, I asked if he would mind if I took another trip to the Grand Canyon – all alone – in September. He said that it was fine, and I began to make my plans. But I was constantly reconsidering this and

that. I knew that I was concerned about leaving Mike out of the trip. But I was concerned about something else too. There was something I could not put my finger on.

I discussed my itinerary with friends trying to come up with the best plan. Should I take the Honda Element or the Miata? Should I only go to the North Rim or visit other places while I was away? Should it be one week? Two weeks? Three? I considered Carlsbad Caverns, Big Bend, the Guadalupe Mountains, or Hovenweep and maybe the Canyon of the Ancients, or Ouray (just to soak in the hot springs and look at all of the Rockies).

Aside from itinerary issues, I learned from my conversations that I was concerned about whether I could do the trip at all. I wasn't sure if I was physically up for it.

I was in an automobile accident two years back. I was not seriously injured, but I was still badly hurt: The airbag burned off some of my hair and bruised the whole top half of my body. And a pistol, in its range case, broke free, flew up against the dashboard, and bounced back against my right knee. My doctor looked me over from top to bottom and x-rayed my knee. Nothing was broken. But the soft tissue injuries took months to heal. My right knee still has trouble

sometimes. Then, just as I was beginning to feel like my old self again, I had a detached retina in my left eye.

I was lucky and only needed one retinal surgery and cataract surgery, but the whole process, until my left eye was given a clean bill of health, lasted 18 months. On one hand, I wanted to take this trip to celebrate my recovery. On the other hand, it was going to be a test to see if I really was okay. I wanted to get back into the mainstream of my life. I wanted a complete vacation from my illness and my injuries. But, I didn't want to push my luck. Everyone was supportive of the alternatives I considered. But I really wanted to go to the Grand Canyon, so it was the center of my considerations.

Given their misunderstanding that this was a spiritual journey, and with a small tip of my cap to friends who practice Native American ceremonies, I began to joke that my trip should be called "Vision Quest Twenty Eleven."

In the end, I settled on a three day drive to the North Rim, stopping wherever I might choose on the first night and then at Canyon de Chelly (pronounced de Shay) on the second. Then, I had reservations at the North Rim campground for 6 nights. After

that, with no schedule for specific dates,
I expected to go through Dennehotso (Denny-hote-see) to
Hovenweep
and the Canyon of the Ancients and then
on to Ouray for a couple of nights.
After Ouray I was probably going to Sugarite Canyon
State Park in northeastern New Mexico, then
Carlsbab Cavern and the Guadalupe
Mountains followed by Balmorhea State
Park in the West Texas desert and then
on toward home. I packed for a three week trip.
I knew I might make it longer, or shorter.

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I stopped in Sweetwater to buy gas. The fellow at the next pump asked about my Honda Element. He had always liked them and wanted to know if I was pleased with it. Then he asked about a friend of his who was a police officer in Austin – oddly, I knew that officer. He talked about their youth together in Sweetwater and how he was such a great fellow but never could play football since his father died when he was in Junior High, and he had to work his way through school.

Then, after high school, he moved to Austin and went to the Police Academy. When I replied that I'd never known that history and that it was a shame his father died when he was young, this stranger began to talk about how his father was dying, now, and that he and his wife were on their way to the hospital, just now, to visit his dad one last time – because they all figured his dad would be dead in the next day or two. We talked a little bit about death and illness and beyond.

After a short conversation, he was done and thanked me for my information on the Honda Element. I said, "God bless you and your father." And he drove off.

Driving down the highway toward Lubbock and

Clovis and maybe to Ft. Sumner or Santa Rosa for the night, I wondered how, after my working 30 years in medical social work, people could tell, it seemed just by looking at me, that I was the one to talk with about death.

My retirement has not brought that to an end. I guess I'm just willing to talk when others turn away. But how do they know?

Half an hour outside of Sweetwater, a guy going the opposite direction lost control of his car and almost hit the bridge abutment, which would have scattered him all across the highway before me. He seemed to regain control, and we flashed past one another at 80 miles per hour. I gave a sigh of relief. That was very close. Four or five more miles down the highway, a black and white Highway Patrol car with full lights and sirens passed in the opposite direction. Then a Sheriff's car went by, an ambulance, half a dozen other emergency vehicles, two wreckers and other officers, all with lights and sirens. All of them headed back toward where that other fellow had barely missed the bridge abutment and had barely missed scattering himself into me. I wondered if it had been a much closer call than I could ever know. No way to tell.

But, there are close calls all about. And I was an old man on my way to the North

Rim, to find out if I am still able to live and laugh and to go out and play.

In Clovis, I decided it was too early to stop and pressed on to Sumner. In Fort Sumner I thought about stopping to visit Billy the Kid's grave. I had stopped there once before in the late 80's. It was fun but weird. Sometime since then, the History Channel told me that the Fort Sumner grave is a fraud, and no one knows where Billy is buried. I pressed on some more to Santa Rosa. I stayed the night at the Santa Rosa Lake State Park. It was really very nice. It was much like Central Texas, with rolling hills and Cedar trees (Mountain Juniper). I had set up the Element so I could sleep inside of it without having to set up my tent for one-night stops. My air mattress lay on top of all the other camping gear. I covered two windows and the sunroof with camping screens so no bugs would get in and sat down at the picnic table to eat supper and then get to bed.

Sitting at the covered picnic table in the fading light, suddenly, I was eye to eye with a Broad Tailed Hummingbird. The light was so dim that I couldn't see his colors. But I've seen that behavior from Broad Tailed Hummingbirds before, and this one sounded like a Broad Tail, making high speed clicking sounds as his wings broke the sound barrier. He hovered there a moment,

a foot in front of me, as if to ask, “Are you a flower or not? Where are your pistils and stamens?” Before I could speak, he realized I was no flower and was gone. It rained in the night, very softly, but I was wakened by the patter on the metal roof. I closed the windows and the sunroof to just a crack so the air could drift in, but the rain would not. Putting the air mattress on top of the other gear was a great idea. I was comfortable and secure and dry. I slept very well after driving almost 600 miles.

3

My earliest memory of the Navajo Nation is from when I was five years old.

We had been to the Grand Canyon on a summer vacation, and my father saw a highway on the map that he had not taken before. It went northeast away from the canyon, through a little town named Dennehotso, over to a trading post named Mexican Water, and then on into Shiprock, New Mexico. And we headed off in that direction. One of the mottos I remember from my family is "A Ciscel Never Turns Back!" We found ourselves (two frightened adults with 3 young children) lost in the desert with no way to turn back.

So, at five years old, I learned about carrying extra water, since we ran out of water. And I learned a lot about carrying extra food, because we ran out of food. And I learned about the poverty of the Navajo: We saw small black skin-covered huts called hogans, which were the homes of these people. As it turned out, they didn't even have real roads.

The highway on the map was really a trail marked by rock cairns every so often. My father did not know how to follow cairns. So he lost his way, and we were just

driving around in the desert. There were no signposts or mountains or any kind of landmark that we could use for bearings.

I had been told that these people were happy in their lives because the reservation was, historically, holy land to them, and they felt blessed to live in the sacred lands – just as we would feel blessed to live in Jerusalem. But, even at the age of five, the few interactions we had with the Navajo, such as asking for directions to Mexican Water, taught me that these people did not like us (white people) and did not want us around, and didn't really care if we died right there and rotted into their holy sand. They would just as soon turn their backs to us and pretend we were not even there. I saw several of them do just that. Even then I understood it, because my father's father was very proud of fighting in the Indian Wars, and I knew he had proudly killed many of them. They had good reasons to not like us. But, finally, dad did stumble upon a rutted road in the desert, and he followed it, guessing between right and left and choosing left. We never did find Mexican Water, but we arrived in Shiprock late in the night.

It had not been a normal road trip. And, even at the age of 5, I fully understood that we all understood that we had barely survived this one. We spent

the rest of my youth occasionally saying that someday we would go back to Dennehotso. We never did return.

On this trip, however, I was going to visit Canyon de Chelly, about 50 miles south of Dennehotso, on my way to the North Rim. And afterward, on my way from the North Rim into Utah and Colorado, I planned to actually drive back through Dennehotso and on to Mexican Water – although I was then going to turn, and not go to Shiprock again.

I arrived at the Navajo Nation, therefore, with a sense of history and wonder: A sense of pilgrimage to a truly Holy Land (completing a drive begun when I was five) and with knowledge that I had better stay on the roads and have plenty of food and water with me.

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I learned of Canyon de Chelly through Ansel Adams' photographs. It's a beautiful place. But those photos are from the early 1940's. Reading up on it, it was clear that this is the most sacred part of the sacred Navajo lands. And it is filled with history. Having been used for human settlement for centuries, it has antique pueblos, artifacts, and petroglyphs that are being carefully studied, and which prove the noble history of Native American Cultures.

But

it is also the home of Navajo who still farm the canyon floor, the river bottom. Between the historical and spiritual and modern presences, most visitors are not allowed to venture un-escorted down into the canyon, except to the White House Pueblo. One may look down into the canyon from scenic overlooks along the perimeter roadways, or one can hire Navajo guides who will escort you into the canyon for historical and artistic tours.

I planned to drive the perimeter roads and stay a night in the campground. I thought I might hire a guide for a small tour into the, but, I've taken tours of the Vatican and such, and I've learned I prefer to wander

holy sites alone and at my own pace.

I crossed the boundary from New Mexico into the Navajo Territory in Arizona through the small town of Window Rock. It seemed much like any small town in America. They were having some sort of festival, and vendors were everywhere. Hundreds of people were on the highway as if it were a sidewalk. And traffic was terrible. There was a small carnival off to the left of the highway. It was slow going for me. But it was also a grand welcoming: This is the Navajo Nation. We're vital. We're enthusiastic. We have a world of which you may be jealous.

I drove out of town across a green basin of crops and homes and businesses. Then, I drove up onto a mesa of Ponderosa forest – through lovely woods that seemed as if they would be rich with wildlife. On the west side of that mesa, the highway dropped down into the desert that I remembered from Dennehotso. It was a barren grassland desert. And after some distance, as I turned northward towards Chinle, the town adjacent to the Canyon de Chelly, the hills became lower and the horizon was endless. When I passed places where people lived, they were not the modern homes of town. They were in disrepair. They were ill kept. They were surrounded by abandoned cars.

Often, they were 40 year old mobile homes that were somehow leaning way over without falling. And there was trash in the yards. And there was trash along the side of the road. And there were men hitch-hiking at the side of the highway who would turn their backs to my car, when they recognized I was a tourist, so they would not have to see me as I drove by. It was just as it had been when I was only 5.

In Chinle, I turned off the main highway towards Canyon de Chelly, and the neighborhood became even more poor. It was in more disrepair. There was more trash. Then, I passed the Alcohol and Drug Rehab Center, the City Jail, the Navajo Police Department Building, and the Navajo National Prison. Those were all modern and clean and new. But it was hardly an honorable entrance to sacred land.

My visit was all over before I actually entered the Canyon de Chelly National Park (which is run conjointly by the National Park Service and the Navajo Nation Parks Department) but I went in anyhow. And there, I was saddened by the state of the peoples and their homes in the park. There were shanties with multiple rusting cars parked beside them within the boundaries of the National (and Navajo) Park and there was more trash scattered about. There were dogs wandering the campgrounds, foraging for whatever

leftover scraps that they might find. One was gnawing at the grease and burned meat on a grill on a fire pit. Within an hour I left. There was no point in hiring a guide. And there was no point in spending the night.

It was another 600 mile day.

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I stayed the second night at the Marble Canyon Lodge, Lee's Ferry, Arizona.

Lee's Ferry is the launching point for most trips down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. Marble Canyon is a very remote motel (remote as in 50 miles to the nearest gas station) used primarily as a staging stop for people paddling through the Grand Canyon.

I slept about three hundred yards from the Colorado River, on the north side near the Navajo Bridge. Going to bed, I saw the moon was almost full, rising over the eastern mountains. It was a good night. The next morning I left about 6:30 and headed for the Grand Canyon.

Driving up a narrow, winding, mountain road with no guard rail, I was impressed with how easy it would be to make a small mistake and die driving off of the cliff. Creedence Clearwater Revival was on the radio. "I don't want to die while listening to Creedence," I thought. "I don't want to have that be the last music I hear. I paid more attention to the road and to not driving off of the cliff. The next song was Van Morrison's "Tupelo Honey." I've always loved that and from the first note I thought, "This I could die to! This,

or maybe 'Not Feeling It Anymore.' ”

But I still paid very close attention to the road. It was only 70 miles to the North Rim, and, stopping to take sunrise photos, I was at the park for morning light. I drove about and looked at the views. A Whitetail buck, head high and proud, pranced along beside the Honda for a quarter mile or more in a meadow by the roadway. Then I sat at the Vista Encantada for almost an hour, while watching the sunshine spread west across the canyon. I got to the campground in late morning. Once I had set up camp, I set out on a hike. But half an hour from my car a thunderstorm began to blow in.

I got a little rained on, getting back to the car, but I was not completely soaked. I retreated to the campground store and coffee shop to look at photos and write emails to home. It rained off and on all afternoon. It was never hard, but it never completely stopped either. It was raining enough that I couldn't deal with cooking dinner. I had some trail mix and Gatorade – a feast by any standard. By 6 PM I retreated into the tent. I don't know when sunset was supposed to be, but with the clouds it was already almost dark. And it was 48 degrees. It was already colder than I had ever expected.

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Saturday I was out and about at dawn, taking photos in the sunrise light.

I was back at the campground for early lunch and spent a couple of hours making sure everything had dried from the previous day's showers and was properly set up for the six night stay I had planned. I was glad to be away from the terrible heat at home. And I was glad to be away from the drought and the wildfires burning in the deserts, forests and neighborhoods there. It was a beautiful and comfortable afternoon. Friday night I had not built a campfire. I just crawled into the sack early. But Saturday evening I was relaxed and comfortable, and, to finish a nice full day, I set a campfire and sat enjoying it as I ate, settled the campsite, and relaxed.

It was a lovely evening, as had been the day, and, as the sky darkened, the campground became dotted with fires and flashlights at many of the campsites around me. One group nearby was smoking marijuana. I was surprised to find it took several whiffs for me to figure what the smell was. I moved my chair, as a Navajo might, turning my back to them and getting out of the current of the breeze. It was a beautiful night.

After the fire burned down, I took a brief walk about the grounds, visited the men's room, and lay down for the night. I had moved the air mattress into the tent. It was already down to 50 degrees when I lay down, and the expected low was supposed to be 42. My mummy bag had proven to be too warm for those temperatures, but I knew that the cold air in a mattress could chill my body very deeply, so I had made my bed with a blanket between me and the mattress and then my mummy bag open and used as covers. I curled up and was out for the night.

I awoke very agitated. There was something very wrong and I did not feel well at all. My chest hurt deeply, but I was sure that it was not a heart attack. I had no shortness of breath and neither fever nor chills, but I felt terrible. And I was afraid of something. I was very afraid. I looked at my watch. It was 12:24. It also said the temperature was 45. I tried to move about, sit up, lie down, or find a comfortable position. Then I heard a very distant rumble of thunder.

“Oh,” I thought, “it’s the electricity in the air from an approaching storm.” I watched for a flash of lightning through the tent and then played the childhood game of counting the seconds to the thunder to guess its distance. Ten seconds. Then twelve seconds. Then 8 seconds. It sounded like it was on the South Rim, which was about 10 miles away. Convinced it was caused by electricity from the thunder storm on the South Rim, my anxiety lessened, my chest hurt less, and I settled back down to try to go back to sleep. I don’t know if I slept at all, but I quickly became aware that the storm was moving closer. Six or seven seconds, then four, then three. Suddenly, the wind came up and shook the trees above me. Pine cones or small branches or litter on

the ground began to blow against the tent.

Mike and I bought this particular tent because we had been in a wind storm at Seminole Canyon State Park a couple of years ago where we had been very disturbed, all night, by the flapping tent. This particular model had received high praise for it's stability in winds. And it had proved itself. We had been in it enough in the past few years. We knew how well it did. Because there had been the light rain on Friday, I had trenched around the tent Saturday afternoon to keep it dry underneath. Its normal setup uses four guy-lines, and it is a very stable tent even without those, but since I was going to be there for a week and was doing the trenching, I decided to add the secondary guys as well. So, as the winds came up I knew it would be fine. It was fully staked with ten inch spikes at the tent and at the guy lines, and with seven guy lines. I could hear the wind blowing things against the fly, but the tent did not shudder at all. It was just fine.

Then it began to rain. And then, to rain harder. It sounded as if the rain were beating against the tent from all sides, at once. And it was very loud. And, although the tent did not seem to flap or shudder against the storm, it did begin to feel as if it were moving in sudden waves or surges. I realized the trenches

were overwhelmed and water was washing under the tent in such quantities that it was buffeting my air mattress (and me) on the surges of water. This campsite had a gravel tent pad that was raised 4 inches from the forest floor with a 6 by 6 inch wooden perimeter, and I had set the tent up on the high side of the pad. But the whole campground was laid out on a gentle slope that arched down to the canyon rim. So a four inch high tent pad was still lower than where my car was parked only 10 or 12 feet away. And water was running beneath the tent with enough force and quantity to shake me about. This was feeling dangerous.

It was 12:40 and 40 degrees. My chest pain had returned. I knew that I might be in real trouble. I tried to curl up beneath my bag and sleep it off. The winds and rains continued. The rushing water continued shaking me. My profound chest pain continued, and even though I felt no other symptoms, I was getting more and more scared that it must be my heart. Oh, I almost forgot: There was still lightning and thunder. I was getting terrified. But there was no place to go. Nothing to do.

It continued for another hour and a half. There was no let up. And I was more and more certain that this was a bad situation from which I knew of no way out. I began to wonder how they

would get my body back home. Or would they simply cremate my remains? And what of my car and other possessions? And I wondered, was I going to die from the rain and wind and flooding or a heart attack? At least I had followed Mother's constant advice and had on some clean underwear.

In my career, I've worked with a lot of people who were dying. And I've worked with a lot of family members of people who were dying – or had died suddenly. It was a good career that I always felt was valid and important and real. But, I have to admit that, even though I made my will and final directives, I never spent much time considering my own mortality. One of the great trials of my retirement has been that I've had some health issues and have had to figure out how I feel about my own death. I haven't liked it very much. Yet, over the years of my work with dying, I have spoken with people about some of the wonders I have witnessed while working with others approaching their ends. I've shared that some people die and then come back and tell what it was like. I've been clear about the great power of the situation: "It is," I have said many times, "a very big event, and clearly a part of life that we don't consider enough." Often, in these conversations, I would ask, "Do you remember seeing those old medieval drawings and woodcuts of people gathered at

the deathbed of some loved one, all of them on their knees with their heads bowed, none of them seeming to notice the crowd of angels, blowing long golden horns, that are breaking through the ceiling to come to gather up the freshly released soul? Well, I have been in situations, in emergency rooms, where everyone was gathered with their heads bowed and they all completely missed the chorus of angels, that you could barely see out of the corner of your eye, that were descending through the ceiling to help that newly freed soul to fly off – away.”

They would look at me funny. It was weird.

I understood.

On many occasions, I have lamented that deaths, in our time, have been moved from home to the hospital. At home, someone might have a chance to see angels in the air above the deathbed. In the hospital the dying are too often surrounded by the medical professionals under fluorescent lights. And it is such an intimidating environment that, even when friends and family are there, no one would ever look up anyway. At home they just might.

And I have often thought that was a shame. And I have wondered why our culture would choose to hide everyone from such a big event. But I have also been aware

that it is a very trying business. Even though I was grateful to do my work, it was also very trying work.

And then, for the first time, in the middle of a terrifying nighttime storm, it hit me. Every time we are with someone who is dying, there is a part of us that is dying too. Every time we are with another person who dies, a part of us dies too. We are beings of a community, perhaps by culture and perhaps by accident, but when someone is dying beside us, we are so tied to one another that any death is physically, emotionally, and spiritually joining us. Joining us as in no other way I've ever known. And death is really taking a part of us along as it takes the other one.

No wonder we need, as a culture, to move the dying to another room, or another building, if possible. Or at least, we need to be able to get up and get a little bit away. We are, albeit briefly, and in a small way, next to our very own death too.

I've been with several hundred people as they died. I stopped trying to come up with a reasonable estimate 40 years ago. But back then, I came up with an estimate that I had been with three to five hundred people when they died. I've just

used that range of figures ever since. And the thought crossed my mind, an hour or more in this terrifying storm (with chest pains), that I had already had three hundred to five hundred little bits of death, those years ago. And then even more little bits of death as more time went by. And it struck me that it was never any fun to have even a little bit of death, but it is always real. And it was always concrete. And it is always part of life.

And (not to argue with e.e.cummings)
it is good.

Unlike much of our culture, that believes that after we are dead we are judged, I have come to believe, while being with the dying, that as the angels sweep through the ceiling down into the room, we may either greet them and embrace their flight, or we may run from them or curse them and drive them away so that we are not carried off in their arms. It is not that we are judged. It is that we choose to fly or stay.

When my father was dying, after a stroke, he was paralyzed and could neither speak nor hardly move, except to move his eyes, to change the curve of his lips from a tiny smile to a tiny frown, or to lift his right leg a little bit. But, he would often stare at the ceiling from his deathbed, frowning angrily, and kick his one mobile leg at them as if to chase

them away like stray dogs in his front yard.

“How sad,” I thought then, “that he is trying to do this on his own terms. It is still his way or the highway. No angels. None.”

I was still terrified by the storm. And I still had very painful chest pains. And I was still alone in the lightning, and thunder. But I took some comfort knowing that I had already died so many times before that, by now, I knew how to do it. How different could it be this time? I didn't even try to sleep some more.

Around 2:20 things began to calm down and the storm was clearly moving past us. Through the last rain drops, thunder, and wind gusts, I began to hear a woman crying. No, it was two, in the distance. I was not too far from the restrooms, and I guessed that some women had run to the restroom building for refuge from the storm. I was saddened and touched for them. I felt sorry for them. But I was also very glad to realize that other people were terrified too. I was not so alone.

When the rain completely stopped, I got dressed and went out of my tent into the night. Everything was blown about: Branches, camp chairs, etc. And everything was soaking wet. With my flashlight, I could see that flotsam debris had pushed up onto the sides of my tent 8 to ten inches

above the ground. All of the stakes and guy lines had held. In fact, so much soil had been moved in the storm, that several of the stakes were now buried. The picnic table and the gear I had left on it were trashed. And my car was covered with branches and pine cones knocked down from the Ponderosa trees.

Because I am a car guy, I tried to sweep all of that stuff off of the hood and windshield. Then, I went to the bathroom. There, I decided to drive down to the lodge so that if I were having a heart attack I might be around someone else when I fell over. I didn't want to be found, at dawn, dead in the mud and scattered storm debris. I knew someone would be up and about at the lodge, and it was only a mile or two away. It was nearly 3 AM. Driving out of the campgrounds, I saw no one stirring. But everything was a mess. On the road to the lodge I saw no one else about either. I did think one tree looked like it had been taken down by the winds, but it was along the road instead of across it, so there was no way to know for sure. I parked in the lodge parking lot and walked towards the main entrance.

8

The North Rim Lodge was built in the era of promoting the National Parks as getaways for the very wealthy. It is a grand log and stone building with a two story entrance portico. Two men were standing in the portico, an old black man dressed in chef's gear and a white guy in his late 20's with a pony tail.

They were smoking cigarettes. We made small talk about the weather, and I learned that the lightning had hit the lodge two or three times and one of the cabins had been hit and badly damaged by a falling tree, but no one was hurt. I cannot say how grateful I was to visit with these two. It was very helpful to have someone to talk with. The younger man was clearly very stoned, and, even though he was not a companion in recovery, he was clearly a member of my large tribe.

"Yeah! The storm was, wow! I mean! Lightning! Wind! Trees down!" And I noticed my chest pain had subsided. After a little visit, catching up on the storm damage there and relaxing, I said I was going to go out onto the balcony overlook and see how the night canyon looked.

It was a beautiful moonlit night with scattered sheets of clouds. The canyon was fully lit – illuminated by the moon – but all

in shades of grays. I went back to my car and got my camera and tripod and took dozens of pictures of the canyon and the moon. At about 3:30, on the balcony, alone with the night and the moon and the canyon and my camera, the deep, dark pain in my chest arose in me again. I stood very still for a few moments wondering if I was going to fall over and wondering how long it would be before anyone else came out and found me there. I arched my back trying to relieve the pain, and a long, low belch appeared from my mouth. I laughed out loud, and it echoed back from the canyon.

So far, Vision Quest Twenty Eleven had shown me that I have already died many times before, with everyone else I have been with who was dying: That we are all that fully connected. Vision Quest Twenty Eleven had also shown me that the Canyon is beautiful in the moonlight – who would have known? And Vision Quest Twenty Eleven had also shown me that I don't know the difference between a heart attack and indigestion. (And, I quickly guessed, that my indigestion may be caused by what I eat, or by what I fear.) All fair lessons, and all worth the trip.

I talked with Jeff, the Night Clerk, about the weather forecasts for around the North Rim: Eighty percent here, seventy percent there, fifty percent somewhere else. The next week was no good at the canyon and no better at the other places I planned to visit. Besides, it might take two more days to clean up and dry out everything at my campsite even if there were no more rain. It became clear that it was time to cancel all my plans and head for home. I called Mike at 4:15 North Rim time, 6:15 home time, to let him know that I was coming home. Then, I slept a while in a large, overstuffed, leather chair by the fireplace in the lobby. The sofas were all filled with people who had moved to the lobby when their cabins were damaged by the storm. It was only for an hour or so, but it was a deep and restful nap. I awoke before six and wandered a while enjoying a last view of the moonlit canyon. The eastern sky was still dark.

Walking out of the Lodge, I met two young Japanese tourists with poor English skills. "Excuse, please. Bright Angel Trail?" I pointed down through the portico, but it was clear that made no sense to them. So I gestured for them to follow me and led them through the dark buildings to the trailhead just past the cabins. There was a sign pointing left

to Bright Angel and right back to the lodge, and I tried to explain the trail would take them to Bright Angel Point and then back to the lodge. The young man pointed first to the lodge and then to the Point and asked, for each direction, "Sunrise? Sunrise?" I pointed toward the Point and confirmed "Sunrise." They went off with great smiles on their faces.

Sunrise at Bright Angel Point sounded sweet. But I had plans of my own for sunrise.

When I got back to the campground, it was still dark, but many of the campsites were already cleared out. As dawn broke, I was breaking down my campsite and packing up. I was going to take a shower, go to Flagstaff, be there by mid-day, find a motel, sleep some more, clean things up some more, and then sleep the night and head for Austin.

I am ashamed to admit that I nearly caused a terrible accident on the drive into Flagstaff. I'm so ashamed of myself that I am not going to discuss details of my stupidity or make excuses about how tired and shaken I was from the stormy night. I did not kill myself or anyone else. But it was very, very close. And I had some real trouble forgiving myself for my being so dumb. Then, about ten miles further down the road someone else pulled out directly in front of me, and I was barely able to avoid them as well.

"Oh, yeah," I thought, "we made mistakes and we have accidents. Sometimes we are lucky and live to tell the tale." I began to forgive myself. But I am still ashamed. And I am still glad that I was lucky.

Driving the last few miles into Flagstaff, I also got real glad that these things come in threes. Counting the first one outside of Sweetwater 4 days earlier, I had now had three close calls for automobile accidents. And I was glad that they do not come in fives or sevens or fifteens.

As I hoped, I found a motel in Flagstaff, napped, unpacked the wet gear, cleaned it and dried it all, and then it began to

rain again. I had been lucky enough to get it all cleaned and dried and repacked.

I had dinner at a chain restaurant next door to the motel and felt I had been given a feast of great proportions. It rained all that night, and I drove out of Flagstaff at about four the next morning. The roads were wet across Arizona. They were not dangerous. But they were not dry. The sun rose behind thick dark clouds.

Stopping for breakfast and lunch and gas and rest stops, I cruised through Arizona and New Mexico with the cruise control set at one or two miles per hour above the speed limit. I made good time, and I knew if I could make it past El Paso that evening, the next day would take me into Austin without much effort. I set my goal for Van Horn, maybe Balmorhea.

Balmorhea State Park is only a few miles off of Interstate 10, in the Chihuahuan Desert, in far west Texas. It's a small park, and though it has both a campground and an old CCC motel, its real feature is a large spring-fed pool in the desert. The pool has about 2 acres in surface area. And the water is perfectly clear and always 72 degrees: An oasis.

I had packed a snorkel, mask, and fins on this trip, just for a Balmorhea swim. Around El Paso, after checking my pace and my mood, I decided I could probably get there shortly after five that evening, could swim for an hour or two, eat, sleep well, and head on toward home the next morning. It would have been just over twelve hours driving, again. I also decided to get one of the motel rooms so I would not have to set up a tent (since my mattress was no longer set up,

in the car, for one night stops. I had left the North Rim without much motivation).

I called and made my reservation. I charged it to my Visa card, and figured I'd be there by 5:30. Half an hour later, my phone rang. It was a recorded message from the bank, saying they had just closed my account due to a fraudulent charge. I was in the middle of nowhere. I'm sure the only reason the cell phone signal got through to me is that I was approaching an INS inspection station. As I drove away from there, I tried to call Visa and the cell phone signal broke up. So I had to drive to a signal and stop and make four or five calls to try to clear up the confusion at Visa.

They were not confused. I had guessed that they thought that my motel reservation was a fraud. But it turned out that about five minutes after they approved the motel charge, I had also tried to use my card in North Hollywood, Florida to buy a TV. I had used the card all day to buy gas. And they knew that my card and I couldn't be in New Mexico and West Texas and Florida at the same time. Their system worked perfectly, and they denied the Florida charge and closed the account. But I had to verbally check and verify all of my charges for the previous week, one by one, and I was on the phone with them, parked on the

side of Interstate 10, west of Van Horn, for well over half an hour. When I got rolling again I adjusted my plans for a 6:15 arrival there at Balmorhea. There would still be time to check in and swim. It would work out fine.

But, as I came over a small rise, I could see a few cars parked on the shoulder way ahead of me. And then a police car parked on the median turned on its flashing lights. I was slowing down, and an officer got out of the patrol car, walked around behind it, and waved at me to stop. "Pull up beside my car," he said, "turn off your ignition, and get out of your car." He then walked away to talk with the next driver behind me. With my car in the left lane, the police car on the median and several cars on the right, the highway was completely blocked. There was a truck with a trailer about a hundred yards ahead on the shoulder, and there was a mutilated deer between here and there. I guessed it had been in an accident and traffic was being stopped to bring in a Med-Evac Helicopter. But, when the officer came back by, I asked about the accident with the deer, and he said there had been a railroad train derailment up ahead and the highway was being closed due to toxic chemicals that could explode. He said, "We might be here all night."

It was 5:45. I was thirty

miles from Balmorhea. There would be no swimming there for me. Not anytime soon.

I have heard it said that, "If you want to make God laugh, just tell him your plans." Although I like the idea of The God of a Sense of Humor, the exact phrasing bothers me. It seems incredibly self-centered to think that we could MAKE God laugh.

And I have also heard it rephrased, "If you want to HEAR God laugh, tell him your plans," or "If you want to SEE God laugh, show him your plans." I guess I have preferred the image of hearing God laugh since I have believed in telling him my plans. To see if he approved.

Rumbling across all of the Chihuahuan Desert around Interstate 10, there was a laughter that I could almost hear. And I remembered to laugh along out loud. Once again, my place was to understand that my life is none of my business. Once again my life was about patience and acceptance. The divine guidance of the holy land was simply, "Wait here. Just wait."

And everyone else seemed to get that too. The officer was polite but firm – no power tripping there. Everyone seemed to understand that their task was to just wait. Wait here. I met and visited with some of my fellow stopped travelers over the next hour or two. This man was from Midland. That man was from California. This man drove a wrecker and was afraid of dead bodies. That man owned race horses and had won last night. This woman had 6 kids. That man had 3. A couple people needed water and I had over 5 gallons. One old man, who had been around the world two times in his life, was ashamed of his not having water on a trip across the desert, and he took water and walked away, without saying, "Thanks," with his head hung down like a dog that had been badly beaten. I am sure he was muttering to himself (like my 5-year-old self way back when) that he would never

make that mistake again. The full moon rose directly in front of us over the abandoned interstate highway. Behind us there were miles of parked cars. To the left was the moonlit desert. To the right were the moonlit Davis Mountains (all silent except for the soft giggles of the Lord).

I was tired and folded a pillow up between my headrest and the door frame so I could sleep in the driver's seat. Fading in and out of sleep, I would watch the moon for a moment or the wrecker driver talking with the officer about how long this would go on or six boys under the age of 12 dancing in the flashing patrol car lights. There was no music, but they danced to the beat of the flashing lights: Break dancing, emulating Michael Jackson's Moonwalk, although they wouldn't have known it, dancing a modern ballet set to the beat of strobe lighting.

Hours passed.

I was awakened by the officer's radio announcing, "All Emergency Workers: Interstate 10 is now open!" I was already in my driver's seat with keys in the ignition. Everyone ran back to their cars. I tossed the pillow over my shoulder into the back seat and turned on the car and already 6 or 8 other cars had passed me on the shoulder

and were gone. The guy from California who was headed to North Carolina to visit his grandchildren blew his horn and waved as he passed by. I waved at the officer and yelled, "Thank you."

We had gone 3 or 4 more miles before we began to see cars coming from the opposite direction. When I finally got to the stopping point for the other side of the freeway, the row of parked cars went on for at least another 5 miles. I guessed that the police would be directing traffic there until dawn. Half an hour later I got to the motel at Balmorhea and went to sleep in my room. I didn't even take my clothes or my shaving kit inside. There was a skunk digging around beside the door to my room. I proposed to him that if he would let me into my room without spraying me, I would leave him alone. It worked.

In the morning, I didn't feel like waiting for the pool to open. I got my shaving kit and a change of clothes from the car, showered and shaved, got back into my car, and drove away.

I was okay. I could drive all the way home.