

LEFT OR RIGHT?      by Barry Gray

I want to tell you about a decision I made when I was twenty-five. I know that is fifty years ago. Please don't interrupt. If this flows it will continue. If not, it will stop. Thank you for understanding.

I think I was in North Carolina. It might have been Virginia. Even Georgia. The trail was quiet that day. The sun was getting low and perhaps I had seen three other people. The previous two weeks had been similar. I had always camped alone. I never talk to myself so I know my voice would have been raspy with lack of use, had I been forced to use it. It was the time of day when I felt godlike with my strength. My legs were beyond iron. Months of walking twenty to thirty miles a day and I would feel anger at the dying light of day. I didn't want to stop. I could go on forever, but my brain always won out. The next shelter was two hours away. I would make it before dark.

There was always far too much time for rumination, self-reflection. What else could I do but analyse myself while walking? This was long before earbuds, Walkman even. Birdsong brought me back to the forest around me, but it would always fade to my inner digging, criticizing, dumping, reconciling. After all, I'm just human, right? Am I at the beginning of my "good long walk?" The middle? Nearing the end where the answer will be? And will it?

Oh, the pressure from friends and family! Go back to school. Try a trade. Stick with one thing. Little decisions had always been easy. Go for a good walk, clear my head, decide. Easy! But this wasn't little. The big answer to the big Life Question of focus, direction, career. I wasn't particularly *unhappy*. But is that good enough? Sure, the latest relationship had brought up the phrase (I'd heard it and thought it) mildly toxic. I worked, contributed, laughed a lot and made them laugh too, was pretty fit, drank not really too much, gave up this and that, passed courses, saw three continents, knew deep, satisfying conversation, tried fasting, read widely, knew popularity. Still, the expectations, the looks. Okay, I learn from successes better than from mistakes. All my good decisions were after good walks.

Hey wait. I take back that about Tennessee or Georgia. I had finished the Appalachian Trail by then, so it had to have been Florida. Forgive that slip. It *was* fifty years ago. But it *was* on a trail. I remember now not really knowing when I had passed into Florida. It all looked the same. Flat, pine and palmetto and yellow poplar, what they called a tulip tree. Yes, it's coming back to me. Days, weeks of backroads, very small towns, red plowed peanut and cotton fields ready for winter, no sense of stopping any time soon and going home. I guess no Big Decision made yet. Then seeing a guidebook somewhere: the Florida Trail. Why not? Better than roads.

So much coming back now. The trail there was different from the A.T. Flat, flat, groomed, wide, part of some huge reserve where nobody lived. Not as many blaze marks to guide me. I had long since stopped keeping track of miles. The first thousand had been fun to tally, smugly

gratifying. The second thousand took on way less meaning. Now in the third, none. It was just the walking, the skylines, the indestructability I could almost talk myself into believing.

I was walking, thinking about an experience of a few weeks earlier, in Georgia. I had come into a small town, three or four thousand, maybe, through a residential neighbourhood. The little town in Canada where I grew up in the 1950s hadn't really prepared me for racial tension. I had been white in a white town. I knew the Chinese family who lived there. I saw diversity later, when I had travelled. The group of young men walking towards me in that small Georgian town were all black. It was late fall, warm. I remember wearing shorts. There were three, maybe four young men in the group. All about my age or younger. One was taller, obviously the leader. I actually remember thinking 'what an incredible specimen of a human being' as he approached. There was no overt tension, no aggressive gestures towards me, but it became obvious that I was to think I was in the wrong neighbourhood. The specimen stood in front of me, half a head taller, shirtless.

I was naïve enough not to feel fear. I use the word specimen because of the man's build. Every muscle from his neck to his waist was developed, and large, and rippling with vigour. I had never been in a fight in my life. I had long since learned arts of diversion and deflection that had allowed such a history, but I was very aware that if an altercation were to start, it would be over quickly.

I wish I could remember his exact question, but it must have been ‘what’s your story?’ or ‘who are you and what are you doing here?’ or some such. I remember looking into his eyes, seeing deep intelligence, calm, humour, guilelessness. Nor do I recall my exact words as answer to his question. It was a simple statement that I was passing through this town and that I had just walked there from Canada. I remember him considering this, then looking down at my bare legs. I suspect their condition, shape, convinced him that I was telling the truth. He had heard of New Brunswick. He had an understanding of how far north that was from his town. Up to that point I had not sensed an immediate threat to my safety although my imagination had painted me a few possible outcome pictures.

I do remember hoping to exude a similar calm and equanimity as I felt from him. Maybe I did, maybe that swayed him. In my reminiscing that day on that Florida trail about the incident of a few weeks earlier, I had recalled the moment when I knew I wasn’t going to get a thrashing. He saw an equal in me. He saw in my legs what he felt in his entire body: power, control, dedication, perseverance, tenacity. We conversed, probably for at least a half an hour. His companions were slightly confused at his actions, but there was no resistance to him. I suppose I told him a few anecdotes about the many months of walking, about the mountain in Maine at the north end of the trail, about the day long Greyhound side trip into the Big Apple, about deciding not to do the nine-mile side trip to see Jimmy Carter’s hometown (he chuckled), even about pain and loneliness because I trusted him. He probably told me about small town Georgia, about his training regimen, even his dreams about life and his future. He and his buddies walked me through their town and pointed me in the direction I wanted to go. I know I

would never recognize him if I were to see him now, but I have fond memories of this friend I had for a very brief moment.

I'm getting very close to the decision I mentioned at the beginning. I will get there, please be patient. By that point I had long given up on having any timeline, any projected date of return home to the life I thought I should have. I had long since accepted the fact that I was an unregistered foreign citizen travelling illegally in the United States. I had stopped worrying about that, if I ever had. I was incredibly frugal. I always found a dry place to sleep. Bridges became my friends. Except one.

Later, quite a bit after the decision I'll tell you about, I arrived at the long bridge that crosses Tampa Bay on Florida's west coast. I remember not enjoying walking through such a densely populated area, but I had to get through it. I had somehow arrived at having a goal, a desired destination. I mean, if I'm this far I might as well go all the way to the southernmost tip of Florida, Key West, right? I got to this bridge and find out it's a toll bridge. I have no idea if it still is, but this was the 1970s. And on top of that the attendant at the booth wouldn't let me walk on anyway, even if I paid the toll. I really wanted to walk the four point one miles (I'd read that somewhere) across but the ban on pedestrians was their way of preventing suicides. The guy believed me that I didn't want to jump, but his job was on the line. I think I ended up hitchhiking across.

I did make it to Key West eventually in the new year. The Florida Keys were easy to live cheap, near free, in those days. Believe it or not there was still lots of “wilderness” camping that went unmonitored by the authorities because the official campgrounds were always all full. Coconuts were everywhere on the ground. Giant pecan trees were dripping and dropping their fruit. Food was plentiful. Day labour was easy to fudge around the legalities if I needed to. The social life of the extensive transient community was rich. The shrimp boats were in harbour.

You know me. You know how easily impressed I am with the beauty of nature, how my sense of wonder is pretty finely tuned. I got to the very end of the very last of the tiny islands sticking out into the Gulf of Mexico, Key West. It was sunset. It was my first time there. I was naïve. I stood with a hundred other people watching as the sun set into the gulf, heard the hush, the colours filled the western sky with such awe-inspiring beauty, my wonder was peaking, my soul fulfilled. And the crowd applauded. I was jarred from my reverie, crushed by the crassness of humanity around me. Then I laughed. I shook my head and walked away and never went back.

I’ve told you some of the stories before from the rest of that walking year in America and I’ll tell you one more before I get back to that decision I made that day on the Florida Trail in the autumn. A good counterpoint to the Key West sunset story is a sunrise story from another place where I experienced awe like never before, and never since.

May, a year since leaving Canada. I’d made my way across the south. *I was standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona, I was such a fine sight to see. I was hoping, almost expecting to see a girl*

*my Lord in a flatbed Ford slowing down to take a look at me.* But I shook the lyrics from the Eagles song out of my head, walked west out of Winslow, to Flagstaff and up to the Grand Canyon. I stood at the South Rim seven thousand feet above sea level, looking down in wonder at high mountains *in* the valley below me. It's ten miles across to the North Rim which is a thousand feet higher than where I'm standing. I'm a walker. I can go down this trail in front of me, up one to the other rim, then carry on to my beloved British Columbia which is profoundly calling inside for my return. My naivete gets the better of me again as I confront deep, impassable winter conditions far from the opposite rim. I'm now equipped for summer and I'm forced back down to the river at the canyon's floor. There it feels like the May it is. The cottonwoods are flowering, dropping their sticky buds. The scent of those buds floods me, I'm transported to the West Arm of Kootenay Lake, the nostalgia and the homesickness of a year away push me to my knees on the banks of the Colorado, and I weep.

I allow the tears. They feel wonderful, and besides, nobody's looking. But get up off my knees I must. I spend three full days in that canyon, exploring. A long, late May day is ending, I'm up a side canyon and I see a waterfall. I approach it. I can see an animal trail leading to the base of the waterfall. I can tell there is a cave behind the water. I can get into it staying dry in the process. The waterfall is a large creek dropping several hundred feet. It is extremely loud but still I think, what better place to spend this night? I can see through the clean water, the view down the canyon before me moving, shifting, and unclear. I read as long as the light allows. My mat and sleeping bag welcome me. Despite the constant thundering, I sleep, the sound entering my dreamlife. At dawn I realize the view through the water is directly to the east. Far

down the canyon, framed by peaks, the sun is rising. Its light penetrates the water, reflecting, refracting, flooding the cave and me with its presence and brilliance. The thought of the sunset over the gulf returns to me. I remember the moment of awe, the applause making me want to deny my kinship with the crowd of humans around me. This moment too, this opposite end of an equally glorious day, in solitude, makes me bow my head in gratitude.

So yes, finally, that decision that autumn day on the Florida Trail. Southbound. I came to a fork. It was a calm, warm day. Left or right? I weighed the two. No answer. Deep doubt crept into my mind that I'd pick the wrong one. Worry gnawed at me, turned to fear. What if? I was twenty feet from the fork, pinned to the spot, unable to move towards one or the other. I berated myself. It did no good. I began to tremble. Is this an image of my future? Is this symbolic of the big decision that I seem to be avoiding by walking one more day, one more week, one more month? Will it turn into years?

I was rooted, the tendrils deep, spreading out to grip the roots of the palmetto to both sides. The trembling became shaking, heaving. Weeping, clammy despair gripped me. Bewilderment. I could not decide, and I gave up my autonomy. Not to a deity, but to the Earth I was walking on, that I revered. I scooped up a handful of dust and tossed it into the calm air. The coarse matter fell, the fines drifted. Some breath of air moved the dust to one side. My roots dissolved and I followed it.

Oh I don't remember which way I turned, but it was correct. I walked to meet you.