

A Short Walk – A Journey Through Life

Or

Inner Child Meets Grandfather

Noon in Redding, California

Sunday

July 6, 2008

*I step off the air-conditioned bus,
brown bag lunch in hand,
directly into the gaze of a homeless man.*

Our eyes meet.

I see hunger.

I envision a monk, a fakir,

a man whose essence is revealed in this dimension as the most humble of images.

I feel an urge to offer alms, so pull the sandwich from my bag.

“Thanks bro’.”

“No problem.”

*I walk away disoriented by my brief encounter with another dimension
and look for a clue to guide me to my destination.*

I ignore the map in my pocket and look to the sun.

Placing it at my left shoulder I head east.

*My mind turns to other times I have walked along the road alone,
Oregon, Nevada, Arizona, Mexico, Central America,
broke, tired, at freeway entrances and along desert highways.*

Thoughts drift back to the sandwich.

Never a gift of charity,

it becomes a gift of solidarity.

The sun is hot, but not unbearable.

I take a swig from my bottle of water.

Thoughts return to the moment and my destination.

I hear a truck approaching from behind.

Reflexively, I turn around and stick out my thumb.

A few more attempts and I realize

I would rather return to my meditative state

than jump in the back of a redneck’s pickup

or worse – into the front seat.

Besides, no one is going to stop.

They probably wonder if there is a gun in my brown bag.

Times have changed.

Empty minded, I continue to walk east.

Awakening

I should be there by now.

I remember the map in my pocket.

Hmmmm. Dumbass male-that-won't-ask-for-directions

Should'a gone south, not east.

Backtrack

Flash of anger

Then a realization that I needed this time to think

– that the experiences of the last few days required some reflection.

Tulelake pilgrimage

Concentration camp

Honoring our ancestors.

Preserving stories for future generations.

Thoughts turn to the suggestion I made before leaving the bus, and how to implement it.

Why had I suggested that the youth produce a play?

A play is ceremony and allegory, historical and timeless, distilled thought and emotion.

No better way to learn, relive and convey

the experiences of our ancestors to the future generations.

How? Process?

Interviews, role-playing

Are all roles covered?

Issei, Nisei, jitterbug, Kibei, Hoshidan, loyal, betrayed, inu, patriot, pragmatist.

We will survive.

Shikata ga nai – go with the flow, it can't be changed. Gaman – be strong, persevere.

How we survive.

Not a one-line presentation or even a two-line struggle.

Just survival.

No victors to write this history.

It must survive.

Present the whole picture and ask SURVIVORS if it's right.

That is the dialectic for this project.

Having resolved that much, I notice the heat as I approach a small store.

B-E-E-R

Hmm. Bottle? Tall? Quart? Mmmmmmmmm.

I take a swig of water.

*I congratulate myself for rejecting Temptation.
Then chuckle at the Indian joke that sometimes replays in my head when I lapse into the
heaven/hell view of the universe.*

*“We never had heaven or hell before the Whiteman arrived,
but we been catchin’ hell ever since!”*

*Thoughts turn to the Indians, Japanese and others currently walking across the country.
Another attempt to claim justice and promote world peace.*

They walk for the survival of us all.

I hear the drumbeat of the Buddhist monks walking with the Indians.

Silently, I join them.

Namu myo ho ...

Nearing my starting point I feel the new balance I have achieved.

Suppressing my male pride I go to a gas station to seek directions.

I ask the first person I see.

“Amigo, ¿conoce dónde está calle North Market?”

“No. No soy de aquí.”

La abuelita glances at me and smiles as I head inside.

A pale young woman behind the counter points the way and I continue.

On the long downhill stretch blisters start to form.

Zoris were not meant for this walk.

Then again, maybe they are appropriate.

I smile when I think about the gap between my big toe and the next toe.

Marks of a childhood spent living in zoris.

The neighborhood kids all called them thongs.

It took years for a few of them to learn the correct name.

Kind of. At least “zorreez” shows good effort.

What a rush of pride the first time I saw an ad: “ZORIS ON SALE”

Blisters make me think about each step.

External pain unleashes internal pain.

Voices of the past.

“Jap! Dirty Jap! My dad fought you Japs. We beat you!”

“Oh yeah? Well you had to drop an atomic bomb to do it!”

“Oh yeah? Well you deserved it.”

“Oh yeah? You assholes put my parents in concentration camps!”

“Yeah. ‘Cuz you’re dirty Japs.”

“My grandfather was a World War One vet.”

“Oh yeah? For what country?”

“This country. The United States.”

“Liar.”

*Maybe my mom told me too much too early.
Maybe she had to.
Maybe I should stop second-guessing.
Maybe I should be a real Japanese and just realize: shikata ga nai.*

*The blisters are growing.
I feel the bubbles rolling around with every step.
I curl my toes to keep them from bursting.*

More painful thoughts.

*To me, Gaman also means
that preserving our dignity is more important than sharing our pain.
We all draw the line somewhere.*

...

*I'm downtown now, approaching the Greyhound bus station.
I see two young men, one White, one Black, in the shade outside the station.
The white guy is sunburned, wearing jeans and a cowboy hat.
The Black guy is in uniform, kneeling next to his duffle bag.
They stare blankly across the street at the American flags that are still up.
As I pass, I overhear the beginnings of a conversation.
Cowboy hat stares straight ahead and says respectfully,
"Where're you headed?"
Soldier stares straight ahead and says enthusiastically,
"Home. I'm going straight home!"
They begin to turn toward each other.
I smile faintly to myself and think.
Slow progress.*

*On the outskirts of downtown I am near my destination.
I see the sign "Pine Street."
I am overcome as I realize the allegorical nature of my short walk.*

*The Methodist church I seek is near Pine Street!
A close-enough description of my first link to the Japanese community.
Pine Methodist Church!*

*I immediately give meaning to this symbolic coincidence.
In the last few years I've been coming back around to my roots in a new way.
This walk has been the summary paragraph.
The journey is completing its first cycle.
What Revelation awaits?*

*Approaching the church I see a stylized flame and cross.
Not the KKK, it is the logo of the United Methodist Church.
The doors are closed and presumably locked.
The congregation has already come and gone.*

*My blisters are killing me and I see relief:
the small patch of grass growing outside the church.
I remove my zoris and let my feet sink into the thick grass.
Warm, soothing moisture from the morning watering bathes my feet.
I think about the fertilizer and weed killer that must permeate this perfect lawn.
As I take the last few steps before returning to the concrete sidewalk
I notice the sign announcing the Sunday sermon.
This is it.*

*The sign faces out.
As I turn the corner I anticipate the Revelation,
the words of wisdom that will mark the climax of my journey.*

*The sign reads:
"A Grudge is a Heavy Load to Carry."*

*I stare at the words.
What do I do now?*

*Should I fall on my knees,
Thank God for this life-changing Revelation,
swear to drop all of my grudges, and achieve release from karma?*

Or should I read it literally and scoff at this self-evident homily?

*The left side of my brain takes over.
I simply decide to seriously consider the message.
After all, I reason,
this is no more than a man-made sign
in front of a man-made church.*

*As I walk into the deserted parking lot
I realize what a blessing this short walk had been.
I resolve to bring the experience to a more appropriate ceremonial close.*

*I unlock the car door with a click, get in, start the engine and turn on the air conditioner.
Thinking about what I am about to do, I turn off the A/C and open the windows.
Indian air conditioning will be more appropriate for now.
Spirits of friends who have passed to the other side pay a short visit.
We share a laugh.*

*I stop to fill up the tank.
Inside, I look for a drink and choose green tea Sobé.
I prefer orange-carrot,
but I can't pass up this little blasphemy.
I contemplate the relationship between
Irony and Irreverence;
Comedy and Tragedy.*

*Looking up, I notice where I am.
White people, about my age
Sunburned, baseball caps (worn the "right" way) or
Pale with permed hair.
Guy behind the register: sleeveless denim, tattoos, hairy.
Biker.
Shields up, Mr. Sulu.*

*As I head to the back of the line, a middle-aged guy steps to the side.
I have to squeeze by,
and almost knock over a snack display.
His subtle, or maybe imagined, maneuver pulls a familiar trigger.*

*I size him up.
Only a little taller than me.
Big arms, workingman's hands.
Barrel torso, flat butt, kinda thin legs, maybe part Indian by blood.*

*I read "Seabees" across the back of his cap.
Navy.
Grandpa was Coast Guard, under the command of the Navy during World War One.
Irony.
He helped round up German "enemy aliens."*

*Thoughts turn to tragedy.
Anger wells up.
"How dare you put a veteran in a concentration camp!
How dare you try to keep me out of line!
I'll kick you're honky ass!"*

*He takes the bait.
I grab his fist and bring him to his knees with a wrist lock.
He calls me a gook and I spit in his face.
"I just came from Tulelake.
Assholes like you locked up my people there!
How many Indians did your ancestors kill to get your land?
When will you stop..."*

*A voice in the back of my head tells me
"You're too old to play this fantasy again."
My inner child argues back: "But ... Jackie Chan is old!"
"Change the channel!"*

A grudge is a heavy load to carry.

*Seabee pays for his gas.
My turn.
"You got any American Spirit tobacco?"
I pay and drive away.*

*I choose a little-used exit from the freeway, take a right away from town,
and stop at a gate with a big "No Trespassing" sign.
Someone is standing outside a truck about a quarter mile away,
watching. I don't need to cross the barbed wire.*

*The store didn't have loose tobacco.
I break open an American Spirit cigarette.
I hold the tobacco in my hand and start to pray.*

*Facing the four directions,
I pray for the ancestors and friends who have passed to the other side;
For world peace;
For the resolution of many conflicts;
For the strength and wisdom to choose the Path of Life over the Path of Death.
I thank Grandfather and Mother Earth,
then let the tobacco fall back to its mother.*

*Ho, mitakuye oyasin
All my relations.*

*Stoic Grandfather
In my imagination
I can read your thoughts*

Steve Wake