The Spirit of Travel

A Book of Stories, Poems, and Pictures About the Search for Beauty

H. Paul LeBlanc III

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Second Edition

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For my mother,

Loretta,

who taught me about beauty.

For my father,

Paul,

who taught me about adventure.

Introduction to Second Edition

When I first published *The Spirit of Travel* in 1999, I was grieving the loss of my mother five years prior. Many of the stories therein focused on the beauty of places, a quality my mother held so dear.

Last year I lost my father. As stated in the Prologue, Mom and Dad took our family places. They had adventurous spirits. Over time, I developed my own spirit and carried it forward to my new family where we carried on the tradition of the family vacation.

This second edition includes two new chapters, noted in the Table of Contents with an asterisk. *A Love Affair* is added before the original *The Big Bend* chapter, though it references it. *Valle Vidal* is added toward the end, hopefully as a fitting closing. The original *Spirit* was shared with family and close friends. With time I have become more comfortable sharing it with you.

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Prologue

Driving and sight-seeing must be in our blood. As adults, my brothers, sisters and I have had many occasions to take driving vacations. Growing up, our favorite family pastime was to pile into the car and take a drive through the countryside. We had many grand adventures. Mostly we visited the parishes surrounding our home town of Baton Rouge, although frequently we did visit other parts of Louisiana.

We also took family vacations. We went to places such as the Florida Gulf Coast and the Smokey Mountains. When we went we drove. Buying plane tickets for a family of nine was too expensive. Besides, driving allowed us to see where we were going, and it allowed Mom and Dad the peace of being able to keep their eye on us seven kids all in one place.

Driving does more than just get you to your destination. Driving gives likely occasion to creating destination out of the journey itself. The destination is not simply the denouement of an otherwise uneventful story. A lifetime of stories are created along the way, by the places that are experienced and the people that are met.

These stories are not simply about travel, but about a life in the surrounding beauty. Such beauty, inspired by journeys both external and internal, have touched my soul. May your journeys be soul stirring by their beauty.

Cars

The first vehicle I ever bought was a Kawasaki GPz 550 crotch rocket. That bike was fast. It went from zero to sixty in three seconds, leaving anything on four wheels behind. I still can't believe my mom and dad let me get it when I was only seventeen, but I guess they figured I'd do it anyway.

My dad, Paul Jr., and I are a lot alike. When he was seventeen he put glass packs on his dad's Chrysler Windsor. It made that low muffler sound, you know, “woom woom woom woom.” I don't think his mom liked it very much. They replaced the Windsor with a Plymouth Plaza. It was kind of a small car. It didn't have much of an engine. You couldn't squeal the tires or anything like that, but my dad put some chrome fender skirts on it to make it look nice.

My mom, Loretta, had a Ford Coupe, which she didn't like very much. She bought it for a hundred dollars. It had a gummy steering wheel, and whenever she would drive around a curve the door would fly open. She really wanted to buy a little Dodge. It was very nice, but she didn't have five hundred dollars. So the practical thing to do was to get the Ford. When she and my dad got married the Ford became “their” first car.

They sold the Ford to some kid in the neighborhood for one hundred and twenty-five dollars. Then they bought a very nice Olds Eighty-eight from my mom’s brother, Rodley. Mom described it as “very cool.” It died.

Mom went with my dad's father to buy a new car. She picked out an American Rambler. Paw-Paw bought it, but it was our family car. My dad was in college, in dental school, in the midst of testing and graduating at the time. And when my dad graduated, they moved to Camp LeJeune, North Carolina and brought the car with them. Dad made a playpen out of plywood, and put it in the back for the kids ride.

They took family trips in this car. Once they went riding in the National Forest. They stopped at a store and asked a fellow, "Can we go on this road here?" "Oh, yeah, yeah, fine. Go ahead, go ahead." So they drove along on this gravel road, and it got smaller, and smaller, and smaller until there was nothing but two narrow ruts. There was no place to turn around, and the tires were stuck in the ruts. Dad was scared because he had four little girls and his wife in the car and felt responsible for their safety. They finally made it out, but he had in his mind that he was going to go back and tell that fellow something. He didn't get around to doing it.

My mom had a similar experience in the Rambler. The Navy sent Dad to the Mediterranean. While he was gone my mom felt lonely. She decided to go to a family reunion in Louisiana. She had four little girls at the time—the oldest was four, and the youngest was six months. She drove herself and my sisters across country through a terrible storm. She finally made it, and I think it gave her a sense of accomplishment.

When Dad was discharged from the military, he bought a Karmann-Ghia. It was his sportscar. We'd all pile into the car, sit in the driveway, and Dad would pretend he was in an Indy race. He'd go through the gears, and he'd make a roaring sound, "- rrrr - rrrr - rrrr - rrrr." But that was his car; that was not their car.

So they bought a Buick LaSabre, a luxury car. Mom said she felt like they had finally arrived. One night dad was leaving a party with Paw-Paw, and he pulled out of the driveway only to catch the rear fender on a pipe. He put a big dent in it. Needless to say he felt awful about that.

He didn't feel safe in the Karmann-Ghia driving the forty highway miles to work from New Roads to Baton Rouge. He gave the Karmann-Ghia to his brother who had it for a week and then totaled it

trying to avoid a dog. Dad bought himself a Jeep. It was bigger than the Karmann-Ghia, and he could be in the hunting club with some of his buddies. That was his toy.

1970 Kaiser Jeepster Commando at our house on Byron Street

That particular vehicle had the longest history of any other vehicles in our family. All of us kids learned how to drive in the Jeep. Once my sisters Stephanie and Leslie, and my cousin Butch went to the store to get some live crawfish to boil. Leslie, who had a learner's

permit, was driving back when they came to the street we lived on. One of them was telling her, "turn!" and the other one was telling her, "put your blinker on!" So she tried to maneuver, and she turned a little too early. The Jeep started sliding into the ditch. Butch and Stephanie started to say, "don't worry, it won't turn over, it won't turn over, it won't turn over." And it rolled completely over onto the roof. The Jeep was never quite the same after that. It had a dent in the top and didn't run very well. But all of us learned how to drive in it nonetheless.

As for myself, I learned how to drive covertly. At fifteen and before I had my license, when my mom and dad would be sleeping or out of town, my friend Chris Lefebvre and I would steal the Jeep, and drive down to New Orleans, and hang out in the French Quarter until four in the morning. We'd go home, driving on the interstate at seventy-five miles an hour, which was too fast for this vehicle. Steam would be bellowing out of the radiator as we were pulling into the driveway. My dad finally sold that Jeep when I was about twenty-one years old. I don't think he ever really got over the loss of that Jeep.

We had other family cars during that time. We sold the LaSabre and bought a Buick Electric 225. It was a big, black, luxury land barge. But, seven kids could not all fit in the back. The car had a little arm rest

between the driver and the passenger seats. We had fights over who would get to sit on top of the arm rest. I remember sitting on that arm rest. It was really grand. You could see all around when you were sitting up there.

Our family was growing, so we got a Ford Club Wagon. Mom liked having the van because we weren't fighting any more. Each of us had a window and a comfortable place to sit. The van was great for family trips. We would drive all over and sing songs. We could really visit with each other and enjoy each other’s company while on our grand adventures.

Once we were driving along the Mississippi River on this gravel road to Cat Island, and the road kept getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller until it was nothing but a sandy Jeep trail. We kids were having a blast, but my dad was getting more and more scared.

My sisters started growing up and moving out. My parents finally got rid of that van and got a convertible VW Beetle. The convertible was really neat. When Dianne got married, my dad put on this golfer's cap and chauffeured my sister and her new husband. They thought it was a fun vehicle. I learned how to drive a standard.

They sold the Beetle and bought my grandmother’s Mercury Cougar. It was a pretty good car. It had a big three-fifty-one engine in it. Mom really liked the horsepower. One day she pulled out of the driveway and hit a pipe. This time she dented the left front fender. So, my brother and I went to the junkyard and bought a used fender. We could only find one in lime green. The rest of the car was in baby blue. They got rid of that car.

They bought an Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight. A big, luxury car; the kind my mother liked. My youngest brother totaled that one when a couple of drug dealers ran a red light. The drug dealers left the scene and the car; of course they didn't stick around for the cops to show up.

My mom and dad finally got a Ford Tempo. Kind of a practical car. I helped them pick it out. But, I think the kind of car is less important than the memories it provides.

Along US 550 Approximately 10 miles north of Durango Colorado, Spring 1991

The Method of Preference

Though I have traveled by plane, train, bus, boat, auto, bicycle and foot, my preferred method of travel is by motorcycle. Have traveled through the lower forty-eight states, I find that the motorcycle provides me with certain qualities which make the trip enjoyable. On a motorcycle, the sound of the rushing wind provides a steady backdrop for thought. Although my time is spent alone, I do not fill it up with the advertisements of civilized life and often drive without the distraction of the radio. There is a peace that comes from the silence of business, and the voice of the wind.

On the motorcycle I can view creation without obstruction. There are no walls between me and life. And the view comes not only to my eyes, but to all my senses. I can feel the rush of the wind. I can smell the aroma of the forest and desert. I can taste the crisp air. And I can hear the sounds of life, unencumbered by muffling insulation.

On the motorcycle I feel control over my destiny. When I lean, the motorcycle follows to the right or the left. When I squeeze my right hand or foot, I can feel the motorcycle grab hold and crouch down. When I twist my wrist, I can feel the eagerness and acceleration. When I shift gears, I can feel the changes in pitch in engine revolutions.

But this control comes with a price. The price is danger. There are no walls to protect me from the elements or the actions of others. The power of the machine can be deceiving and deadly. Although I may feel the control of the machine, the control of my destiny is contingent on the will of God. Others may not be aware of my presence or may consider my presence non-threatening to their welfare. Others may not observe that necessary space which exists as a consequence of my lack of walls. In that sense I do not have control over my destiny. Yet, it is the curious juxtaposition of control and danger which excites the soul.

Other methods of travel have their unique qualities which make them enjoyable. But their purpose may be different. With the motorcycle, it is not the destination but the journey itself which becomes important.

Jenny Lake, Grand Teton NP, Wyoming, Summer 1994

The Cycle of Life

The water sparkles in the light

beneath the towering peaks.

The summer brings warmth and melting,

and a downward rush

only to be caught and carried up again

in preparation for the arrival of winter.

It is an analogy of the cycle of life,

ever-changing in the spirals

yet stable in the image through time.

And though we hurry to prepare for the coming winter,

we survive to be renewed with the coming of the spring.

Going to the Sun

In my youth, I examined maps and traced the outlines of states from the pages of the encyclopedia, dreaming about places to visit. Mountains and rivers fascinated me by their grand design, and although having never been there, somehow I fell in love with Glacier National Park.

In May of 1994, Mom was in the hospital. She was undergoing chemotherapy, and I found myself sitting with her not knowing what to say. I hated seeing her that way but knew my family would gather around her, so she would not be alone. I needed to get away to see life again.

Calling my uncle Robin, we planned a motorcycle trip to Yellowstone. He would go with me as far as northwest Wyoming but would return home after a week on the road. I determined to continue on to see other parts of the northwest not yet visited.

Traveling to Glacier was paramount. It was a lifelong desire. Traversed was a loop from the northwest corner of Wyoming through the Snake River valley of southern Idaho and across eastern Oregon and Washington and northern Idaho. I had never been as far north as

McDonald Falls, Glacier NP, Montana, Summer 1994

the mountain country of northwestern Montana, and even in late May and early June it was still quite cold. A gray blanket of clouds lay overhead, and a misty drizzle chilled me to the bone. Mom and the sadness of her leaving filled my thoughts.

Approaching from the west, a wall of mountains signaled the destination as if out of a dream. The trees were cool and crisp in the valley. I paid the fee at the gate, then made my way to the gift shop to purchase a topographical trail map of the park. Maybe it would be my souvenir. A habit of mine was collecting maps in places visited. Maps brought me here, and maps would always remind me. Would this trip be any different?

I walked outside to my motorcycle and decided to look at the map to find the sights to see: mountain lakes, scenic views, waterfalls. I had achieved a lifelong quest. Going to the Sun, the name of the road which traverses the park across the Great Divide, seemed appropriate: Mom was beginning a new journey toward the light and would be achieving a lifelong hope.

Following remnants of the last ice age, the road turned into the great "U" shaped valleys. The finger of God had carved these valleys and left signs of passing. Snow still crouched in sources of the glaciers

atop the mountains, renewed each year by a new layer of frozen rain. I drove up the slopes, stopping at each pullover to see from a new perspective and to take photographs for my memory book.

Reaching the top of the Great Divide, I stopped to take a deep breath and to walk in the snow. Most of the winter's fall had melted. How long had this layer of ice been here? I felt alive in the passage through the coldness of the winter.

I climbed back on my motorcycle and proceeded down the other side. It was afternoon and the sun would be setting behind me, behind the mountains. I was now going away from the sun. The mountains had broken the clouds and the sadness was slipping away. Soon my mother would be going to the sun.

Crashing

In the distance you could hear

a faint sound,

like wind rustling through leaves

yet it was constant.

Walking toward the sound,

it grew ever louder.

Then I came upon the sight:

a rushing, white flood.

It was a veil

held together by threads

with beads dangling

in every direction.

Falling away from the singular course

and crashing into a unity of sound.

I felt drawn to it

as at a wedding

with all eyes on the bride.

Baring Falls, Glacier NP, Montana, Summer 1994

Overlooking McDonald Creek Valley from Crystal Point, Glacier NP, Montana, Summer 1994

Re-Creation

Cool and green, the crisp air filled my lungs, and I felt alive.
It was renewal. It was re-creation.
My muscles aching with miles and days of journey
could not discourage me from feeling alive.
The aches made me feel more alive.
And the cool and the green of late spring brought freshness,
refreshed a weary soul.
The road going to the sun, although a worthy goal,
allowed for a chance to look back over the way I had come.
Although it was hard,
I do not regret what I have learned along the way.

Creative Visualization

Closing my eyes, I searched for a way back to the center. I felt lost and needed to find a new direction. The road was a distant memory, and troubles of daily life filled my mind.

Trying hard to dream of a place, an image of a seagull flying in the daytime sky came into my mind. Looking down upon it from just above the left wing, just bright sky blue formed the backdrop. I flew beside it, knowing we were traveling to some destination by the sign of wind. The gull's feathers were rippling with the passing of the current.

Following the seagull's lead, he was teaching me something. What the seagull could be showing me, I did not yet know but felt at peace. I held on to the image until it faded from view.

The next image came rather suddenly. I was transported to a cool meadow. At the center of the meadow was a small pond. There were few trees around, and the meadow rested among rolling hills. Springtime was evident from the crispness in the air. The wildflowers were just coming into bloom in radiant blues, purples, yellows and reds.

Although there was much to see in the meadow, I felt strangely drawn toward the water. The bank rose three or four feet above the water slowly descending to the water's edge. I felt powerful, as if able

to go to the water and walk upon it. But, I did not feel compelled to go to it, but only to cast my gaze upon it. My attention was focused.

The surface was smooth as glass. It appeared solid. Yet I knew that it was deep and encompassing. What was this image about? Was it connected to the image of the seagull? I did not yet know. Hoping that understanding might be revealed to me, that hope was not troubling. Serenity enveloped me in the meadow gazing upon the water.

The image of the pond faded, and a new image appeared. In this image I could see myself traveling toward Glacier National Park. However, in this image I was approaching from the east. The only time I had been to the park I had traveled from the other direction.

Although I could not see my body, I knew it was me. I had a bird's eye view of the front of my motorcycle from just above the left handlebar. In the right corner of the picture, the road and the front wheel of the motorcycle up to the instruments and handlebars were visible. The road rushed by, and the wind and smell of the breeze were sensual. How did this relate to the first image?

The Great Plains of central Montana rolled through the center of the picture, and to the left rose the mountains of Glacier National

Park. Why was I traveling from the east? What was I to learn from the image?

As my mind raced searching for an answer, the image of the water in the meadow came back to me. There was something of centrality to the image. There was something of connection among the three. Opening my eyes, the images stayed with me. From where did they come? What in my life could have triggered these images? What do these images have in common?

All three images involved a journey, whether internal or external. The two possibilities were juxtaposed as to become inseparable. Why a seagull? Why a pond? And why traveling west in Montana? What was it about these images that were trying to teach me about my life?

Then I had an enlightening inspiration. My life had been about seeing and feeling, and about journeying. My experience taught me that journeying was in the eye and the mind. My experience also had taught me that education was exposure, and that all of life is learning. And I thought about my learning experiences.

In some of the most troublesome periods of my life, I found inspiration in the experiences of others and tried to use those

experiences as a guide. I learned about those experiences by seeing, conversing with others, and by reading. One thing all three images had in common was that they could be connected to images from stories read during critical times in my life.

When I was twelve years old, the book Jonathan Livingston Seagull was a revelation, for it was the first that taught me how to delve into the spirit of life through my own experiences. The book taught me to seek that which seems impossible but necessary. I learned to take risks and adventure into the unknown.

Five years later, I read Illusions, by Richard Bach. In this book, a messiah named Don brought the narrator, Richard, to a pond in a meadow. Don was trying to teach Richard how to walk on water. The lesson for me was about the power of the will. I could do what I chose to do. I could learn what I allowed myself to learn.

In college, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance described a journey and an exploration of self. Robert Pirsig was traveling west through Montana in search of self. I understood his experience on the road, traveling with his thoughts as a companion. Having been there, I had found self.

In my mind I journeyed back to the pond. What was it about the centrality of this image? This image was conjured upon the center of my being, upon my belly. Drawn to it, it was my center. I was not the center; rather, the center was me. Being drawn toward the center, with no desire to think about that which surrounded me, I realized the importance of paying attention to the center. The center is me.

Pondering the significance of this event, peace resides in the mind. I have the power of will to bring it about. While traveling, I find peace through beauty seen in my mind's eye. While dreaming, I am transported back to the center.

Looking west toward Glacier NP, Summer 1994

Power and Serenity

I could hear a whisper in the distance

that became a roaring

the voice could not be stopped.

Walking toward the source

I felt small in its splendor

yet cradled in its control.

Listening more intently

revealed a multitude of voices

a cacophony and a symphony at once.

In its voice was power

a power that could destroy

a power that could heal.

Yet in the destruction was renewal

and in the healing was a tearing away of the past.

I surrender to the power

and surrender

to gain serenity.

Vernal Falls, Yosemite NP, California, Spring 1993

Colorado River Canyon, Canyonlands NP, Utah, Summer 1995

The Dance

The light dances on the canyon walls,
reflecting the colors of the layers.
The canyon is a laceration in the land,
but the laceration has cut
through several layers at different times,
as if reopening ancient wounds
which have never healed
only to reach ever deeper to the core.
The cut in each layer has its own story to tell,
its own colors.
And throughout the day light shines
upon the walls in different directions
giving a new view.
If you are lucky you might catch a glimpse of the dance.

Landscape and Double O arches, Arches NP, Utah, Summer 1995

Fragile Protector

The strength of the arch is often deceiving.
It is built through years of weathering of the softer surrounding layers,
until only a frame of a bridge is left.
The structure calls a walk upon it,
to traverse from one side to the other.
Or perhaps the call is to rest beneath it.
It appears to carry the responsibility
of protecting those beneath its shadows.
Yet, it is so fragile,
and often pieces fall and come crashing down to the shadows beneath.
It seems the protection is illusory, indeed a misguiding mirage.
But from a distance,
the arch is a window allowing vision to the other side.

Frozen

Ripple along the surface

In slender pattern clinging

Until a breeze of gentle force

Cools the quickened pace

Slowly the rivulets settle

On layers of friends past

Serving as a foundation

Left nothing for to meddle

Yet in stentorian quiet

Lies a whisper so enraged

That in this gentle moment

Arrangement becomes its might

Reflection upon the surface

Shout shattering of precious light

Uplifting in a secret vision

Of a subtle turbid past

Under the Natural Arch, Bell Smith Springs National Natural Landmark, Illinois
Winter 1992

Viewing

From the beginning

The trail went one direction—up

Presenting a challenge

To stamina and wherewithal

A promise of reward awaited

One step after the other

Dodging rock and obstacle

On occasion a stumble

And threat of injury

Yet hope alive kept pursuing

An accomplishment to view

Upon the arrival a height

A crack, a break, a solace

A measure of worth

Emory Peak, Big Bend NP, Texas, Spring 1990

The Precipice

Standing upon the precipice

a warm wind blew up from the desert below.

I looked down and saw

all the world before me.

Feeling large and small at the same time,

it was then the realization

that the warm wind which blew upon my face

was a whisper from God.

I was given a gift,

finding beauty in desolation,

warmth in aloneness,

and peace in danger.

It is the spirit of the desert which calls me.

South Rim of the Chisos, Big Bend NP, Texas, Spring 1990

A Love Affair

I never realized how much I could love a place until I went back and counted how many times I had returned to learn about her. Such is my love affair with Big Bend National Park. I had thought about visiting her long before I went. As a child I had developed a fascination with maps, and I thought that funny bend in the Texas border with Mexico was a curious thing.

Big Bend was not the first National Park I recall visiting. When I was six, my parents brought us on a family vacation where we met up with our cousins at the Smokey Mountains National Park. We did not live near any national parks, so it would be many years before I would have my opportunity.

My first semester in graduate school I met some friends with similar interests. In the course of a conversation about camping and hiking, I told them I had always wanted to visit Big Bend. We planned and made arrangements for the following spring break in 1990 to visit the park. We rented a Chrysler Sebring and drove from Baton Rouge.

The first night we camped on the shores of Lake Amistad just outside of Del Rio.

On that very first trip I learn a secret about the park: the best places to visit are well off the pavement. We camped at La Clocha off the East River Road, Terlingua Abaja off the Maverick Road, at Mule Ears Spring, and finally up in the Chisos in Boot Canyon. I had a lucky break on that first trip, learning that secret, because I would revisit some of those same sites years later.

The very next Spring Break I decided to strike out on my own for a solo back-country trip. Having been on two of the three major gravel roads, this time I would travel the Old Ore Road. I found a parking spot near Roy's Peak and hiked in along the Telephone Canyon Trail to a secluded spot behind the Alto Relex. The next morning I hiked into Telephone Canyon. The quietness and solitude provided a needed respite from the stresses of graduate school. Yet, I also learned the importance of attentiveness as the hike over the Sierra del Caballo Muerto was neither well marked nor frequently travelled. On a few occasions I got off trail only to have to back track. The sun

was setting as I came back over the pass toward my camp below the Alto Relex.

A few years later in 1995, I got to share my love of Big Bend with my uncle Robin, yet my experience with back-country hiking was insufficient to prepare my guiding them, and we returned bruised from that adventure. I did eventually return to Mariscal to see the Canyon twice, solo. The third trip to Mariscal Canyon occurred seven years later, this time from the west at Talley.

Perhaps my pride was bruised which drove me to seek the beauty again. As it turned out, such a motivation may have affected my uncle. In 1998, I had a conference in San Antonio, and I had urged Melanie to accompany me there wherein after we could take a trip out to Big Bend. I had wanted to share with her my love of the park. Since we started dating, we had opportunities to travel together and had seen several parks including Mammoth Cave and the Smokey Mountains on our first trip, then Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Zion, Bryce, Canyon Lands, Arches and Rocky Mountain on our second trip to her brother's wedding in California. I believe I had started to influence her love for

this type of travel but thought I might really impress her if I showed her my favorite place.

I told her about my trip to Big Bend with my uncle, and that I had mentioned to him that I was going again with Melanie, and he wanted to meet us there. I guess he got the bug too! We met up at the Chisos Basin, then collected our gear and hiked up the Pinnacles Trail. At the bottom of the steep switchback section, I offered to carry Melanie's pack after carrying mine to the top. We had already climbed over one thousand feet of elevation, but the switchback section climbed another in a relatively short distance. Robin stayed with her while I made the first ascent. Then after returning, the three of us climbed the section together and eventually made it to our camp site in Boot Canyon.

The next morning, the three of us hiked to the South Rim, where Melanie and I stopped to sit and let our feet dangle over the side. I had seen this view before, but I felt overwhelmed with joy at the opportunity to share the beauty of that space with her. I looked at her

and said, “This seems like a good place to get engaged.” To which she replied, “Are you asking?” And I replied, “I guess I am!”

Uncle Robin heard us laughing and asked what we were laughing about. I told him we just got engaged. He snapped a picture of us, which now hangs on our wall with our family photo.

Our engagement on the South Rim of the Chisos.

Big Bend National Park had become our favorite! As our family grew, we shared this place with our children. In 2005, we made our first trip as a family to Big Bend. Because we were a young family, we stuck close to the road. We did camp in the park one night at

Terlingua Abaja. The next morning I drove the family to Santa Elena Canyon.

A few years later I joined a motorcycle riding group who took annual trips during October to the Big Bend region with rides into and around the park. It seemed I had found a community that enjoyed both riding and visiting my favorite park! I rode with the group annually a dozen times or so over the years, sometimes with Melanie and the kids following, and sometimes with just Melanie. These times allowed me to share my love of the beauty of this place with others. Yet, I never had the chance to share it with Mom. I decided I would not miss the chance to share it with Dad.

Spring 2012 Dad drove out to our place and we made the trip together with my son, Tomas. The three of us first camped at Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management Area twenty-six miles south of Alpine as it was getting too late to find camping in the park. I observed him sit and gaze at the mountain for hours. The next morning, we packed up and travelled down to the park, our first detour down the Maverick Road toward Santa Elena. Dad had never been to Big Bend so we

stopped often for him to take photos and take in the scenery. We followed around the park to see the sites, and eventually made our way to the Old Ore Road on the east side of the park. Our goal was to see the Ernst Tinaja which I had not been to before so the three of us could experience it together for the first time. Further up the road we stopped and camped at Willow Tank. The next morning we exited the park and headed to Black Gap Wildlife Management Area where we spent our final night camping. The remoteness and solitude of this area provided the three of us to enjoy each other's company without distraction. Four years later I brought Melanie and the kids to camp at Elephant Mountain, where Melanie and I sat and gazed like Dad had before us.

Gazing toward Elephant Mountain south of Alpine TX, Spring 2016.

Melanie and I also had the chance to share our love of Big Bend with our friends, Jen and Chad a few years later. Both of them were born and raised in Texas but had never been to the park. We explored the park, including a hike to Cattail Falls to which none of us had ever been.

Dad passed away during the Spring of 2022.

Spring 2023, I asked Sophie and her boyfriend to accompany me to Big Bend to attempt a hike to Banta Shut-in. The Shut-in is deep in the Chihuahuan Desert along the typically dry Tornillo Creek. I had heard about the Banta Shut-in by a chance encounter with a retired couple serving as camp hosts in Dog Canyon at Guadalupe Mountains National Park. I had taken Tomas on a camping trip for his eighth birthday and we struck up a conversation with the only other two people in this area of the park. They told us that they had just come from spending ten years serving as camp hosts in Big Bend. I asked them what was their favorite spot in the park to which they replied, Banta Shut-in.

During my annual trip to Big Bend with my motorcycle riding group in October, I decided that I would try and ride down to the K-Bar and hike to Banta Shut-in. I was on my own as I had learned earlier that my riding buddies do not “hike.” Nor do they trust their motorcycles to off-pavement routes like the two miles of gravel to the K-Bar trailhead. Grief is an interesting journey, and I suppose the solitude would be good for me. However, I only made it halfway down the trail before I realized that I may not have it in me to take the entire hike to Banta Shut-in and back by myself.

I shared with my daughter how important it was for me to see this site, but that I did not want to attempt it alone. So, for Spring Break, the three of us headed to the camp site one half mile from the trailhead. The next morning we headed down the trail and made it to see the Banta Shut-in, the first time for all three of us. I had managed to raise three children to love the beauty of the outdoors.

The Big Bend

Several colleagues from school and I ventured to Big Bend during spring break in 1990. I had wanted to go there for years and looked forward to the opportunity to back-country hike. Enjoying my first excursion, I returned several times. During the first and subsequent visits, I hiked many of the park's trails and experienced the awesome South Rim.

From the South Rim of the Chisos Mountains one can view the entire southern region of the park from Santa Elena Canyon in the west to Boquillas in the east and on south to Mexico. This vantage point presented a vista of places visited and revealed those I wished to hike. Mariscal Mountain rose in the distance, and I knew someday I would hike the Cross Canyon and Mariscal Rim trails to the great canyon.

Mariscal Canyon is the deep gorge which forces the Rio Grande from its southeasterly route into a northeasterly direction creating the familiar big bend of Texas' border with Mexico. On our first visit to Big Bend, my friends and I had attempted to drive the unpaved River Road to Mariscal Canyon in our small rental car. Proving difficult to traverse, we were more than a little nervous. Getting late on the last night of our trip, we decided to turn around and spend the night in the desert near La Clocha. The road denied the opportunity to go to Mariscal Canyon.

On a subsequent visit, I inquired at the ranger station about remote and beautiful parts of the park where I could solo, backcountry camp. The rangers told me that both Telephone and Mariscal canyons were beautiful. However, advising me that Mariscal Canyon could only be reached by high clearance, four-wheel drive vehicles, I was again denied reaching the trailhead at Solis just below Mariscal Mountain. My little Nissan Sentra was not their vehicle of choice. Instead, I hiked into and camped in Telephone Canyon.

Backcountry hiking in Big Bend has offered many rewards. Solo adventuring in such an unforgiving environment has provided unique challenges, and in the solitude, undistracted attention to the

beauty of nature. Yet, I longed to share with loved ones the joy of my adventures and discoveries.

In the summer of 1995, I met my Uncle Robin and Aunt Susie Oden in Midland, Texas. From their home in Midland we departed for a two-week tour of southeastern Utah and western Colorado. After returning to Midland, Mariscal Canyon again wedged its way into my thoughts. Robin had a four-wheel drive truck and had never been to Big Bend. Deciding the opportunity was ripe for a backcountry hike, I persuaded Robin to come along.

Robin invited his fourteen year-old son Patrick, and Patrick's friend Robert, to share the adventure with us. Arriving at the ranger station in Big Bend, we inquired about weather, road and desert conditions in the Mariscal Mountain area. Securing a camping permit we proceeded to Solis, a primitive campsite on the river, east of Mariscal Canyon. The elevation rises from the river at 1,900 feet to the ridge of the mountain then down to the rim at 3,200 feet. From basecamp at Solis, the trail climbs 1,700 feet upward over a seven mile distance to our destination. We anticipated a tough day's hike to the Mariscal Canyon rim.

Arriving at Solis in late afternoon we set up camp. Patrick and Robert went swimming in the river, while Robin and I hung out and began supper. Later I hiked a short distance up the ridge above the Solis camp to get a view of the river and the trail toward Mariscal Mountain. We bedded down early. Up before first light, I was ready to start hiking while the desert was still cool. Robin, Patrick and Robert were more interested in eating a full breakfast. I strongly urged the others to eat quickly, as hiking in midday would be hot. Our hike began around seven o'clock.

I informed the party to carry plenty of water, as the desert sun can fool the hiker with dehydration. I packed a compass, a small map, camera and lenses, and water for myself, and led our group on the hike. At the trailhead we checked the map to give us a general outline of the trail. Following the trail across the desert floor for just over a mile, we arrived at our first climb. Scaling the bluff, we reached a height of 2,200 feet. From that point on, we would be hiking up a gradual incline. We stopped and noted the ground we had crossed, and drank water.

For another two and a half miles we followed the trail to the base of Mariscal Mountain, which we reached by ten o'clock. The sun

Patrick, Robert and Robin (from left) below the bluff.

had risen high, and the temperature was warm. Checking our water supply, I noted that both Robin and I had brought a sufficient supply for ourselves. Patrick and Robert informed me that each of them had their own canteens, which they packed along with the food.

Several ridges further down the trail the temperature had continued its upward rise. When we checked the water supply again, I realized that Patrick and Robert were a gallon short. Their canteens held less than a quart. I had neglected to check their water supply before we left camp assuming they understood to carry plenty. We thought we had put an extra gallon of water in the knapsack. We had hiked several miles, and it was a long walk back.

Mulling over options together and realizing that we had already walked over half way to the canyon, Robin wondered aloud, “maybe there is a quicker way to the river.” I suggested that one of the ravines likely lead to the river. Because most of the ravines were heading eastward off the bluff, I suggested that we look for the first ravine that cut toward the river and follow it. We didn’t want to hike back across the desert floor during the hottest part of the day. Despite my earlier suggestions, Patrick and Robert had worn short sleeve shirts, and hiking back the way we came seemed like a bad idea.

Continuing we crossed several ridges. As we walked, we would cross a ridge, only to see another ridge. Concerned about the distance to the river, we hadn’t reached an elevation that would allow us to get our bearings. Finally, reaching the sixth or seventh ridge, we could see down a ravine to the Mexican side of Mariscal Canyon. At the head of the ravine, a piece of an old tire we determined to be a trail marker gave us confidence that the ravine would lead to the river. We followed the trail.

By noon we had walked down the ravine about a mile, but the hike was difficult because of the boulders, cacti, bramble bushes and other prickly plants. Coming to a place where another ravine cut in

from the right forming a steep drop, we faced yet another obstacle. Should we climb down there and perhaps face a deeper drop ahead? We might face a dead end and be unable to return. Robert scrambled down a few feet to reconnoiter, reporting that he didn't think we could climb down. Taking a look I noticed it was a fifteen to twenty foot drop.

By this time it was around 12:30 in the afternoon, and I was feeling the effects of dehydration. Having rationed my water, I had only the two plastic jugs containing Tang, which I had been saving. Little water remained in my canteen, but both Patrick and Robert had run out. All that remained was Robin's water. Consuming the last of my canteen water, the Tang was rationed for the rest of the party.

All of us were feeling weak and anxious. We had hoped that we would find the river and soak in the water to replenish what we had lost through perspiration. Then, we imagined we would just float back down the river to the campsite. Seeing the big drop off in the ravine, I was gravely concerned.

Backing up several feet, I sat next to Robin and said that I didn't think it was wise for us to go down that way. "What do you

suggest?" was Robin's reply. "We could try climbing up the ridge above this ravine, but that may be difficult to do in the heat of the day."

I wasn't sure what would be the best plan. "I think we need to get out of here," Robin said, at which point I started to express genuine concern for our survival. He said that he couldn't think that way. I responded, "I feel responsible. I'm the most experienced at hiking, and it was my idea to hike to Mariscal Canyon."

Robin and I thought it best to tell Patrick and Robert about the severity of our situation, especially the diminishing water supply. I called the boys over and told them that the situation was critical and that it was not clear whether we would survive. "I can't think like that! We are going to survive; we're going to get out of here," Robin reiterated. Our only apparent option was to climb out of the ravine and return the way we came. I told Robert and Patrick that our water supply was very low and we should dispose of all unneeded items.

We left the extra weight behind including the jar of peanut butter, the empty water bottles and my empty canteen. Removing my long sleeve, flannel shirt, I applied extra sun-blocking lotion. Reluctantly I told Robin that I couldn't carry the camera equipment; it was too heavy. I doubted my ability to carry the weight and make it out

of the ravine. I left the camera bag with lenses. I was going to leave my camera as well, but they all agreed I should keep it and they would help carrying it.

Gear we left behind.

After resting about twenty minutes, we started up the ravine. As we made our way, I suggested we stop and rest whenever we found a shady spot. We did that even though there was little relief as it was midday and shade was scarce. Every now and then there would be an overhang or a high cliff that we could lean up against to get a little bit of shade. Most of the time we were barely able to protect our faces and the top part of our bodies. Our legs remained in the sun.

An hour into our return hike Robin's leg started to hurt. A past knee injury was bothering him. Patrick was starting to have serious dehydration problems. I informed them of the importance of reporting blurry vision, a serious symptom of dehydration.

I waited with Robin as he rested his knee allowing Patrick and Robert to continue on ahead. Shortly, Robin and I started back up, and we continued until he had fallen behind about fifty feet. By this time, after hiking a half-mile or so from the bottom of the ravine, I had caught a second wind and was motivated to survive. Catching up to Robert and Patrick to wait for us, I informed them of Robin's condition and suggested they wait in the next shady spot for Robin while I continued ahead.

About fifty yards further, a giant boulder had fallen down across the ravine creating a natural tunnel. A breeze blew through the cave that gave respite from the desert heat. I called down to the others to come up and cool off. They could not make out what I was saying because I was around a bend in the ravine, but finally after some time all three hiked up to the cave. We rested, then I told them to stay there while I go find water.

Patrick, Robert and Robin in the cave.

Leaving one full jug of Tang, I brought the other half-empty jug with me. About three hundred yards up the ravine from the cave, I found a pothole filled with water. I had noticed the pothole earlier and thought it important to remember just in case. The water was dirty and teeming with mosquito larvae, but it was water none the less, and we needed it. Finishing off the remaining Tang, I took off my T-shirt and put it over the spout. I dipped the whole jug and T-shirt into the water allowing the water to strain through the T-shirt into the jug. With the filled jug, I returned to the cave.

Although the water looked bad, drinking it didn't seem bad. We could get sick from the dirty water or die from dehydration. We

finished off the Tang in the other jug, and discussed the water situation. Robert had brought his plastic jug with him. Robin still had his canteen. We ate the rest of the food and rested.

By four o'clock the temperature had dropped, and shade began covering the western side of the ravine. Climbing up to the water hole, we filled our jugs and wetted our T-shirts. I took pictures of the water hole documenting the trip back.

The pothole with water from a recent rain.

Once we reached the top of the ravine, we realized that we would make it back, but the hike would be very difficult. Along the trail back I remembered thinking that the ranger had told us it was seven miles. It seemed farther. I figured seven miles from the Solis trailhead

to the top of the ravine and four miles down the ravine making it eleven miles. We all thought the distance was much greater than seven miles. Of course, it was the first week of June. We were hot and imagining greater distances. We were angry with the ranger for telling us that it was closer than it seemed. I remember being quite angry, and that anger motivated me to make it back.

By the time we had crossed the third ridge, Patrick was starting to have serious dehydration problems. Eventually we reached the point where the trail curves away from the base of Mariscal Mountain. We found another pothole containing water part way down a ravine. At that point, Robert seemed to be in the best shape, so we asked him to climb down the twelve-foot cliff into the ravine. Robert scrambled down to the pothole, filled our water jugs, and wetted down our T-shirts.

The sun was now in descent, and we were hiking in the shadow of Mariscal Mountain. Patrick was cramping badly. We stopped every one hundred yards or so for him to drink water and rest. His serious cramping and dehydration problems continued.

Even though the trail from the base of Mariscal Mountain to Solis was mostly downhill or flat, it remained difficult given our

condition. It was important to stick together. Feeling responsible for what had happened, I walked behind the rest of the party making sure not to lose anybody.

At the edge of the bluff we scrambled down and reached the desert floor as the sun was setting. With its setting, we could no longer see the trail. The last mile was hiked in darkness. We walked into our campsite around nine thirty in the evening; the last three miles had taken almost four hours. Having left at seven in the morning, we were on that trail a little over fourteen hours.

Returning to camp, the first thing we wanted to do was soak our feet in the river. Patrick and Robert went down to the water right away, and Robin and I eventually joined them. Afterward, we tried to eat but found it difficult, particularly Patrick who was in severe pain. Robin was doing okay but had severe pain in his legs. That night I suffered from heat exhaustion and adrenaline overdose. Shaking and very warm, I was exhausted but couldn’t sleep. Awake all night, I oscillated between hot and cold flashes. I spent the night in the truck wrapped in a blanket with the engine and air-conditioning running as strong winds blew across the desert. It was a very strange evening.

Awakening the next morning, we rolled up all the gear and provisions, threw them in the back of the truck and took off. Patrick had a really bad night. Robin and Robert were doing okay, but I was still feeling bad. We took the River Road out of the backcountry. Once on the pavement, we drove straight to Midland, stopping only in Fort Stockton for supper.

In Midland, we told Susie what had happened. She went to the store and purchased a two-quart bottle of Pedialite. She was quite upset and demanded that we drink the Pedialite to replenish our electrolytes. In a few days we were back to normal.

Unable to see Mariscal Canyon the first time, I had to return. Robin planted the idea in my head by suggesting that we return to retrieve our stuff if only for the sake of pride, but his mind quickly changed upon remembering the seriousness of our last adventure, and he swore to never return to Mariscal Canyon. Knowing I would be traveling to San Antonio in November for a professional convention, I thought it would be a cooler and better time of the year to make the trip.

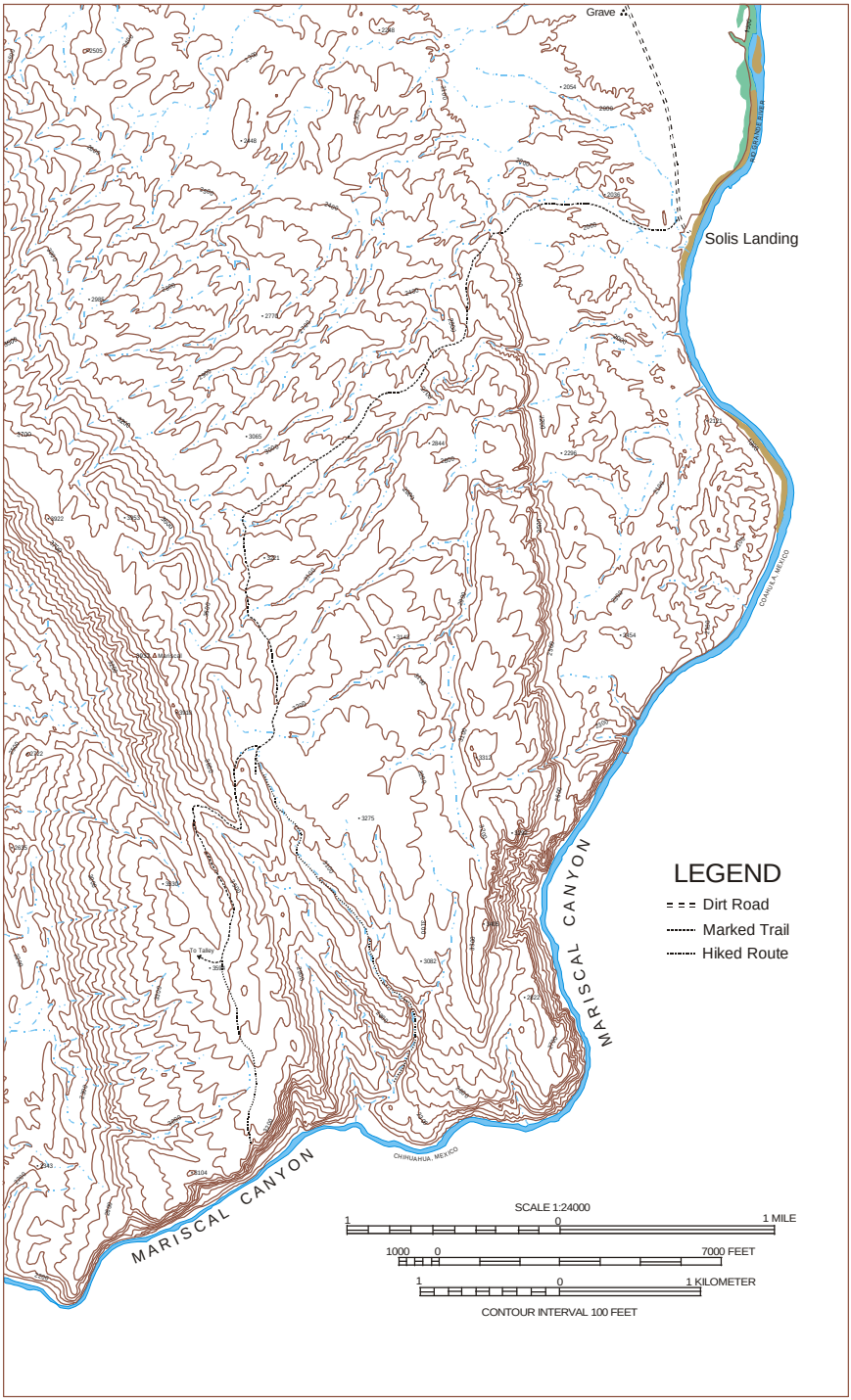
Retrieving the camera equipment became the rationale for returning, but proving to myself that I could make the trip was more

important. The whole purpose for going in the first place was to see Mariscal Canyon. Having decided to return, the first day of October I started training at Little Grand Canyon National Natural Landmark, only ten miles from my home. Every afternoon I would hike a three and a half mile loop with an elevation change of three hundred fifty feet. After hiking a week, I added the weight of two gallons of water and a backpack. Soon I felt physically prepared for the journey.

Concern lingered because the trail to Mariscal Canyon was fourteen miles round trip and had a relief over 1,700 feet. Carrying three gallons of water and provisions for three days, as well as camping gear and warm clothing, would be strenuous.

In planning the trip, I contacted Big Bend National Historical Society and acquired topographical maps. Studying the maps and noting the location of the trail from memory, I decided to set up a basecamp at the base of Mariscal Mountain, two to three miles up the trail from the trailhead at Solis. Meanwhile, I continued hiking several times a week.

A friend who rock-climbs showed me a few climbing techniques. Several afternoons we spent “bouldering” and discussing possible dangerous situations. I contacted Big Bend National Park and


Grave
Solis Landing
RIO GRANDE RIVER
COAHUILA, MEXICO
MARISCAL CANYON
MARISCAL CANYON
CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO
LEGEND
Dirt Road
Marked Trail
Hiked Route
SCALE 1:24000
1
0
1 MILE
1000
0
7000 FEET
1
0
1 KILOMETER
CONTOUR INTERVAL 100 FEET

inquired about the weather conditions, the patterns of the past several weeks, and the expected forecast for the next few. A week prior to leaving for Texas, I started collecting my equipment, clothing and provisions.

In the third week of November 1995, Congress and the President were locked in a bitter debate over the federal budget. All nonessential government agencies, including national parks, were closed. Despite the fear and disappointment that extensive preparation was for naught, I turned my thoughts to the convention and to the research presentations. I packed camping gear along with business clothes and convention materials and headed for San Antonio.

Each evening during the convention I turned on the news to check the budget situation anticipating its approval, or at least the opening of the parks. Monday following the convention was the last opportunity to make the trip to Big Bend National Park and still have time to visit Robin and Susie for Thanksgiving. Monday morning I called tourist information in San Antonio and was told the park was now open. By ten o'clock I gathered my belongings and started the drive to Big Bend four hundred miles west of San Antonio.

From USGS 7.5 Minute Mariscal Mountain (2803-114) and Solis (2903-111) quadrangles.

Arriving at the ranger station around four o'clock in the afternoon, I requested a permit for solo backcountry camping in the Mariscal Mountain region. The rangers handed me forms and requested my boot for a print. We followed all the necessary procedures for tracking solo hikers who might not make it back according to their itinerary. Having already camped solo at Big Bend, the procedures were reassuring.

The previous trip to Solis demonstrated that the road was not as treacherous as was suggested by the high clearance, four-wheel drive vehicle recommendation. I drove west on the River Road from the Boquillas Canyon to Solis, which took about forty-five minutes. Along

Along the road to Solis.

the way, several muddy spots created by a recent rain made navigation difficult in the front-wheel drive Nissan. Eventually I turned onto the mile and a half long spur to Solis. After three-quarters of a mile, a mud hole engulfed the road, and the car had to be parked almost a mile from the Solis camp site.

Camping gear at the trailhead at Solis.

I packed all of my equipment and provisions and started hiking along the Solis spur to the Mariscal Rim trailhead. From the trailhead I hiked about a quarter of a mile toward Mariscal Mountain when darkness came forcing me to stop. The moon had not risen providing little light for the trail. At the first flat, pebble-free spot, I dropped the

gear, unrolled the sleeping bag, and ignored the tent. I retrieved a few items from of the food kitty and went to sleep that night in the desert.

Awakening at dawn, I rolled up the sleeping bag, put on the backpack, and started on my hike. Carrying a tent and sleeping bag, all provisions, warm clothes, gear and three gallons of water, the backpack weighed close to forty pounds. Setting up basecamp on the mountainside required an early start to cover the distance before the temperature rose.

Rock piles known as cairns, irregularly dispersed by the rangers, created a trail guide. However, memory of our previous expedition on the trail became critical to success. The ranger had informed me that to her recollection no one had been on the trail in months, and she hadn't been on the trail in over a year. We may have been the most recent hikers on the trail.

After hiking three-quarters of a mile past the bluff, I removed my pack to take a short rest only to notice a wet spot at the bottom. A small pinhole in one of the gallon jugs was leaking very slowly. I determined to drink it first.

Following the trail to the base of the ridge, where the trail turns from a westerly direction to a southerly one, I gazed down at where the

second water hole had been. Apparently there had been significant rain a couple of days prior, which was a good sign. I stopped for a short rest and to contemplate the view.

After crossing three small ridges, I came to a good camping spot. To the left of the trail was a wide flat spot under the shadow of the mountain which provided a good view of the long, downward-sloping mountain ridge, past the bluffs, the desert floor, and Solis in the distance. I set up basecamp and checked my time. It was still early, around ten o'clock Tuesday morning. I took pictures of basecamp, my camping gear, and the mountain. I rested at basecamp for about a half an hour, then ate a little beef jerky, a little bit of cheese and some raisins.

Basecamp below Mariscal Mountain.

The second time around the trail didn't seem quite as long. The cooler temperature made a big difference. The journey to retrieve the camera equipment could be accomplished that morning. Taking two quarts of water and trail mix, I headed down the trail toward the ravine. The old tire marked the trail from the top of the ravine. The path revealed signs of our previous passing.

Trail marker for the Cross Canyon Trail

When I reached the place where our gear was left, about one and three-quarter miles from the top of the ravine, I noticed that things weren't how we had left them. Water apparently had pushed some of the stuff out of the hole where we had left it and deposited it higher up on the sides. My canteen was sitting on top of a rock and so was my

camera bag. Under a rock above the hole, the plastic peanut butter jar had been chewed apart by a wild animal. Everything we had left remained and showed no signs of human tampering.

The gear as I found it six months later.

The gear and trash that we had left were packed into a bag. Saying a quick prayer, I made my way back up the ravine. Somehow I lost the path and hiked into another ravine, stumbling upon a more heavily traveled trail. The trail apparently cut across a ridge into Cross Canyon. Hiking up the backside of Cross Canyon, I found the other trail and realized that other trail went to the Mariscal Canyon rim. I made my way out of Cross Canyon and to the unmarked fork in the trail where the Cross Canyon Trail leads off to the left from the

Mariscal Rim Trail. From the Cross Canyon trailhead it was a short walk back to my campsite.

Arriving at basecamp around four o'clock in the afternoon, I was too tired to try to hike back to Solis. I decided to spend Tuesday night at basecamp and then hike out the next morning. I went to sleep resolved but awoke in the middle of the night debating whether to leave Big Bend first thing in the morning. The next morning I put on my clothes determined not to miss the opportunity to see Mariscal Canyon.

I packed with me half a round of Gouda cheese, some sunflower seeds, and a quart of water. I hiked up the trail and took the right fork around Cross Canyon. The trail followed the base ofMariscal Mountain to a lower ridge that followed the southerly direction of the mountain. In some places the trail was difficult to find, but eventually a rock cairn would reassure me that I was on the trail. The trail lead to the top of a ridge that revealed a view clear to Boquillas Canyon. On the other side of the ridge I could see the western side of the park and Santa Elena Canyon. It was gorgeous, and thinking to myself this place was one of the most beautiful spots in the park, I was very grateful for the opportunity to see it.

Looking toward the Rio Grande and Santa Elena Canyon from Mariscal Mountain.

I followed the ridge toward the canyon until reaching a high point on the trail that gave me the first glimpse of the canyon rim. As the trail was getting more difficult to follow, I used point-of-sight to find the rim. I turned around to see from where the trail had led in case I lost it on the way back. Slowly upon descending toward the rim from the ridge, I found the location of the trail to Talley. A trail to the edge of the rim from that point was not evident.

Finally, I made it all the way to the canyon itself. It was breathtaking. As the canyon was about fifteen hundred feet deep, I couldn't get close enough to the edge to see the river. I scrambled down the side of the canyon twelve to fifteen feet to a ledge, using

some of the techniques learned from my friend. Climbing down was frightening and exhilarating.

Looking toward the big bend from the rim of Mariscal Canyon.

Once at the ledge, I could look over and see the river. Mariscal Canyon was awesome to behold. Although they help recall the memories, the many pictures taken could never compare to the experience of being there.

I made it back to basecamp at about eleven o'clock Wednesday morning and thanked God for the safe return. I ate a little something, packed up and started back down the trail. I made it back to Solis and to my car around four in the afternoon, threw all of my gear in the trunk and headed for the highway. I still had time and plans to go to

Robin and Susie's house for Thanksgiving. When I arrived late that evening, I brought to them the gear retrieved from the bottom of the ravine on the Cross Canyon Trail at Mariscal Mountain.

The Canyon

Life is precious
though sometimes dangerous and frightening.
The journey risked with a few companions
to see what few others have seen.
The first attempt proved nearly fatal,
yet I felt called to return
and complete the journey,
alone.
Preparing myself mentally,
physically,
emotionally,
and spiritually,
I set out to find
that place which beckoned me.
Traveling along the rocky course,
every step was measured
until coming to the place sought.
There, in that place,
was a view I had nearly perished to behold.
Walking into the desert with a map, a compass,
and a few provisions,
I returned with a new vision
and feeling of purpose.

Mariscal Canyon, Big Bend NP, Texas, Fall 1995

Cool and Dark

The brook bubbles and spills

over the rocks smoothed over

through years of weathering.

The trees hulk over head,

closing out the light,

leaving a dark and silent running.

But the trees grow tall along the waters edge.

The cool, clean water provides nourishment and soothing.

Suddenly the darkness does not seem overbearing,

but welcomed.

And in the tiny pools

resting amidst the turbulence

of the brook,

life swims and flourishes.

West Prong Little Pidgeon River, Great Smokey Mountains NP, Tennessee,
Summer 1992

Collapse

The way looks treacherous:

A tiny bridge built

to cover the trail

that had fallen away.

A dangerous journey—

often not wanting to continue,

afraid to face the trials,

although the goal sought, unseen,

seemed worthy of the difficulties.

Eventually reaching my goals,

I always remembered the journey,

and the beauty that found me

through the trials suffered along the way.

Guadalupe Peak Trail, Guadalupe Mountains NP, Texas, Spring 1991

Winding

For thousands, maybe millions of years

The winding river has cut

Through layers and layers of rock

The earth, in constant change and growth

Uplifted, twisted the broke the rock

Once laid by competing volcanoes

Laying on my stomach

At the edge of the crease

And gazing in the direction

I believed to be down

The orientation of the rock

Fools me, disorients me

Were it not for the winding river

Convincing me of its place

I left this place changed

By the recognition of the process

And by the constant movement of time

Black Canyon of the Gunnison NM, Colorado, Spring 1991

The Mission at Santa Apolonia

Pondering a recent discussion with a friend, a thought gripped me that maybe redemption and grace are related to karma. For me, faith was never enough: making the world a better place was required. A call from the Spirit earlier in life prompted me to change my undergraduate major from electrical engineering to philosophy and enter the seminary to make the world a better place. The journey brought me through many trials and tribulations to the vocation of teaching.

Often, sight of the goal was lost. And, by not navigating the obstacles of the journey with patience and quiet persistence, grace was lost. Yet, I believed redemption came from creating good karma through the use of personal talents. A talent to teach was a gift of grace.

Grace is neither earned nor deserved but gained by softly walking. Grace offers forgiveness for the wrongs committed. The action is prayer. The response is redemption. Without grace, I am in a desert longing for water. The thirst leaves me feeling weak. Although many have traversed this desert, the experience is solitary. A void of grace in the Spirit calls forth a desire to travel to a new place. Where did I learn this desire? Who taught me?

My father's quest for the Spirit brought our family to Santa Apolonia, a small village in the mountains of Guatemala, approximately fifty miles north of the capital. His purpose was to open a dental clinic for the Diocese of Baton Rouge. In the summer of 1971, we traveled overland through the mountains and deserts of Mexico across the Great Divide. Such travel is a risky venture for a family with seven small children, the youngest one and a half years old. But the call was great, and we felt excitement and togetherness.

Dad seeing to a patient in Santa Apolonia, 1971.

We also viewed many things we had not seen or previously imagined. What I remember most about our mission to Guatemala was the scenic beauty of the countryside—the mountains, the green

coolness, the land of the eternal Spring. There were many contrasts: the mystery of the Mayans and the familiarity of the Church, the extravagant wealth of the few and the abject poverty of the many. The clinic was for the poor.

My father suffered many frustrations in his attempt to give: the slow pace of construction, the bureaucratic requirements of obtaining proper equipment, the housing of his family. For me it was exploration. I developed friends, and together we hiked around the perimeter of the village. The family also took short trips to other villages, sightseeing in destinations with strange names: Chichicastenango, Iximché, Atitlán.

While our boarding house was being built, we went to school in Tecpán, in the nearest town. Classes were in Spanish, taught by nuns. And, the children lived as we did. They loved and were loved, yet they were poor.

More than twenty-five years have passed, and civil war has torn apart the places I called home that one short summer. But my mind looks back to that time and place, that space, and reminds me of a larger purpose.

People of the Road

While on the road, opportunities to meet good and interesting people abound. The occasion of meanness on the road is rare. One Spring, with only a sleeping bag, a tent and some extra clothes, I traveled through southern New Mexico. Looking at a map, I noticed a state park called the Valley of Fire in the desert north of White Sands. When I arrived, the park was closed for repairs. The road doesn't always comply with plans, so I decided to continue on until a suitable place for sleep was discovered.

The sun was slowly setting when a sign for Cibola National Forest appeared. I turned onto the gravel road and drove several miles to the ranger station. The ranger suggested some places and gave me a few tips about sleeping in the forest. I went on my way and found a soft spot beneath the trees. By this time the sun was down, so I rolled out my sleeping bag and laid down.

Upon awakening the next morning, the air was very cold. Wanting to get an early start, I packed the sleeping bag and got on my bike. It wouldn't start. The ranger station was about a mile away, so I pushed the bike until I came to a hill and determined the weight of the motorcycle and the force of gravity were greater than my strength. I

left the bike on the side of the road and walked the last half mile to the station.

When I arrived the Ranger was making breakfast. I greeted him and walked up to explain my situation. He offered me some breakfast, fried eggs and potatoes, and suggested we go retrieve my bike. We drove back down the road and put the motorcycle into the back of his truck. He had to hurry back to the station because he was expecting some other rangers. The rangers were to inspect the region for fire danger. “You are lucky to find me this morning, since this is the only weekend of the year that I make the inspection for this area.”

Back at the station he lent me his tools to check the starter and wiring. After some tinkering, I managed to get the bike started. Thanking him profusely, he wished me good luck and advised the quickest and most direct route to a gas station. “The next town up the road is Willard, forty miles away.”

Willard is a small village with one gas station which doubles as the grocery store. After pumping the gas, I walked inside to pay the attendant. The young man behind the counter asked me where I was from. “Baton Rouge.” He was from a town outside Bakersfield, California. His sister had moved to New Mexico, bought this store, and

wanted him to come to Willard in the summer to help her run it. Suspecting he just wanted to talk, I stuck around for a few minutes to listen.

"What direction did you come from?" I obliged him with an answer. "Did you notice the lake on the left side of the road before the last turn?"

"Yes."

"That lake is only a one inch deep salt brine lake filled with tiny shrimp. It smells real bad. I don't go there that often. Can you see that hill over there?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes I go over there and look for arrowheads. Other than that, there ain't nothing to do in Willard, New Mexico."

All in all, I spent fifteen minutes conversing with the young man about nothing really. Later the thought pleased me that perhaps I was sharing the good karma received from the Ranger.

The Way of the Ancients

Walking into the woods,

Imagine a life

seeing this place for the first time.

Imagine a life

here in harmony with nature.

The woods and the water,

the trees and the air,

the creatures and the rock,

bring a sense of belonging

and a sense of intrusion.

A sense of yesterday or tomorrow

lives far away.

The vicissitudes of life disappear.

Nothing carried but the present.

The harmony of the present

lives in this place.

Yet, there is a sadness,

for I must leave this place.

But a hope,

to return for peace of the present.

Lusk Creek National Natural Landmark, Illinois, Winter 1996

Yellowstone NP, Wyoming, Summer 1994

The Bison

The two lie together,
wild hearts in a wide open space.
The whole world surrounds them,
but their only concern is with each other.
We travel along and observe.
We marvel at their peace,
but we do not know their history,
the struggles they have endured.
They are at rest now,
and we hope for such for ourselves.

Deja Vu

The first time was a harrowing experience. There was something familiar about the place, although I could not remember ever being there. Peering through as the door was opened, the chill of knowing and not knowing stopped me from entering the room. The teacher turned to question my hesitation and sensed the urgency of refusal in my face. “I have never been here, yet I have seen this place.” She placed her hand on my shoulder to reassure me and told me, “it was only deja vu.”

In a very vivid dream several years later, the setting, the place, the time of day were etched in my memory. And, I remember the house. The house sat large atop a small hill. A stone façade encased it along the bottom half, and white stucco with timber trim completed its image. The house was being remodeled as if needing a cosmetic change. Walking quickly around the front of the house and down the hill with trepidation, the house somehow gave a moment of respite from my pursuers.

The next spring found me motorcycling up the East Coast to New England. I had never been there before and wanted to see the famous coastline of Maine. Following a map, I made my way to Mount

Desert Island to visit Acadia National Park. I knew nothing of my surroundings and took in every detail. A sign read, "Welcome to Bar Harbor." And, the main road wound through a town proud of economic success.

As I turned my gaze from house to house, I looked over my right shoulder, and there stood the house in my dream. My head start spinning and my first reaction was to drive away as quickly as possible. Incredulous and doubting my sight, I drove down the road but could not shake the feeling.

I turned around and drove back to get another view. There stood the house with every detail from the dream. It stood upon a hill with scaffolding around its periphery. There was no mistaking its identity. That realization brought back the chill, greater than before.

The park was situated on the far side of town. Frightened but intrigued, the route required passing the house again. As evening approached, I made my way to a local restaurant to eat and inquire about the house. The house was built in the early part of the century by a wealthy northeastern socialite. The house caught fire, was rebuilt and was being remodeled to be used as a hotel.

Education cannot explain how knowing that house when I had never been to New England. I must simply accept the experience as a mystery of life.

The Beauty of Home

Looking away to new adventures,

determined to see beauty surrounding,

I traveled far

ever called by desire

and viewed wonders of distant places,

mountains and plains,

streams and oceans,

forests and deserts.

Adventure relieved me

from the mundane

though knowing

I would have to return.

Then I discovered

something always known:

Adventure was where adventure was made.

Beauty was where I sought.

I did not have to travel so far

for beauty was home.

Kisatchie Bayou, Kisatchie National Forest, Louisiana, Fall 1991

The Dream

After passing, mother visited me in a dream. She was sitting in the soft, tweed-upholstered chair, against the wall between the front door and window in the living room of my rental house. Mom had visited me here once before while she was alive, so it did not seem out of the ordinary.

I was lying on my stomach on the floor beside the chair looking up at her and then down again. As she sat, she listened to me tell of the troubles of daily life, the struggles I was enduring as a graduate student, and relationships, as she had done many times before. I remember being quite upset and animated while telling her my stories. She was very patient.

Stopping to catch my breath, she excused herself to get a drink of water. When she walked into the kitchen, and out of my view, I began to cry because I realized that she was gone. And I missed her terribly.

Returning with her cup of water, she sat down and gently asked why I was crying. “Because you are not really here.” She looked at me and said, “Yes I am.” Then I awoke.

Valle Vidal

The San Juan and Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Northern New Mexico I have come to love. Like Big Bend, I have shared the love with my family and friends returning time and again to take in their beauty. I shared this beauty with Dad. The sadness of his leaving has filled my thoughts.

Dad was an adventurous type but getting up there in age. He would like to go camping and site-seeing with me, and I suggested New Mexico. Our first night in New Mexico was spent under the trees in Cibola National Forest in the same spot that I had stayed years before below the summit of Gallinas Peak.

We travelled up the east side of the ranges, then up into the Sangre de Cristo above Red River and spent our second night in Carson National Forest. The next morning we drove down the mountain and into Questa. We kept seeing these signs everywhere that stated, “Save Valle Vidal.” We were curious but finding it wasn’t on

our agenda for this trip. I thought we would have another opportunity soon to see Valle Vidal together. The opportunity never came.

Having visited Chama and the southern San Juan's before on a solo trip, with Robin and Susie a few years later, then with Melanie and the kids, I wanted to show Dad the beauty of this range. We crossed over on U.S. 64, and stopped at the overlook above the Brazos cliffs. Years later, Dad would take Donna to see this place.

H. Paul LeBlanc Jr., overlooking Brazos Cliffs, Tierra Amarilla, NM

A few months after his passing, I led a group of fellow riders on a multi-day trip through New Mexico. Our plan was to ride along

the eastern flank of the Sangre de Cristo. I had planned to get us to Red River early enough so that I could take a ride to see Valle Vidal. I knew my fellow riders would not take me up on my planned side adventure since the road to Valle Vidal is unpaved. I wanted to see this place that Dad and I talked about going to see but never did. However, the wildfires that season forced the closure of Carson National Forest.

The wildfires also closed other sections of the planned route through the Jemez Mountains. I chose a new route over the southern San Juans. Being the guide, I stopped at the Brazos Cliffs overlook so my friends could enjoy the beauty. I was unprepared. Grief was overwhelming.

When I returned from the trip, I shared with Melanie my desire to finally see Valle Vidal. I contacted Chad, and we started planning a motorcycle camping trip, watching weekly the closure status of Carson National Forest. In late August, the forest was reopened. We took the bikes and found a camping spot in the Cimarron campground, 9,600 feet above sea level.

The next morning, Chad and I rode out National Forest Road 1950 to Cimarron, through Eagle Nest and Red River, to Amalia and into the Valle Vidal from the west. We were exploring, imagining what it would have been like to be there before cars, motorcycles, or other vehicles. It wasn't difficult to imagine. This place is kept pristine. It occurred to me why the people of New Mexico so cherished this place and wanted to save it.

After several miles of gravel, we rode around a corner to discover the "Corral." It looked like a good place to stop for a bit a take a look around. This was the place; this was where one could see the full glory of Valle Vidal.

Grief struck again. Dad would have loved this place. I stood there in awe for moments I could not calculate. I could feel the wind. I could hear the quiet. Chad gave me the space. As we were walking back to the bikes, I said to him, "Dad would have loved this place."

View of Valle Vidal from the “Corral,” Carson National Forest, NM, Summer 2022

When I returned from New Mexico, I posted this to my Facebook account:

> “Dad loved the solitude, the quiet time of the wilderness. He hunted for many years, but it was not the hunt that drove his wandering. It was the woods. I heard the calls of the elk. I heard the howls of the coyote pack in the dark. Dad, I hoped that you could

see me, as I hoped Mom could see me all those years ago in Glacier. I love you and miss you so much."

I wanted to share this with my family and friends. Time may not permit it. My only hope was to process it and share it through my writing.

The following Spring, I determined to carry on the search for beauty through travel passed down to me with my children. The first opportunity arose in Winter. Gabrielle wanted to see as an adult, this place that Melanie and I visited with her when she was only three years old. She made the plans, and I met up with her in Las Vegas, from where we drove to a small village in the East Fork of the Virgin River valley of Utah. Her mother often talked about how beautiful Zion and Bryce national parks were. And, she wanted to see it herself at an age where she could remember it.

Snow was falling and it was cold. Few people visit these parks this time of year, compared to other seasons. But the snow draping the red rock cliffs presents a sense of timelessness. We wanted to see it together.

Bryce Canyon from Farview Point, Bryce Canyon National Park, UT, Winter 2023

A few months later, Sophie accompanied me to see Banta Shut-in in Big Bend, and Tomas and I travelled for a second attempt to climb Wheeler Peak in the Sangre de Cristo in May. Snow stymied our attempt, so we took our motorcycles on a tour of the mountains of Northern New Mexico, albeit at a slightly lower altitude.

We crossed the Rio Grande on the Gorge bridge and headed toward Chama. I wanted to share with Tomas the beauty of the Southern San Juans.

Tomas overlooking Brazos Cliffs, Tierra Amarilla, NM, Spring 2023

We stopped at the same overview that I had shared with Dad. Grief comes in waves. This time, though, I had the opportunity to share it with my son.

In August, Tomas and I decided to make a third attempt on the Wheeler Peak summit. Hopefully this late in the season enough snow will have melted to make it possible as a day hike. From the top of Wheeler Peak, we could make out the high meadow of Valle Vidal. The next day, we would visit it together.

In an airplane somewhere over Mississippi, Spring 1991

Storm o'er Mississippi

As a child I imagined that God and the angels lived in the clouds.
Prayer was always with eyes, arms and hearts aimed upward
toward the firmament of the heavens.
Upon our death our souls would float up
to live in the clouds with all the saints.
The uplifting thoughts of heaven,
the feeling of floating
seems to be common to many.
Although the experience is personal,
it is shared through our common metaphors.
It has been said that if you look into the clouds
you may catch a glimpse of those souls.

Epilogue

Dad once told me, "When a rose blooms in the garden, your mother is visiting us." Mom taught me about beauty. She taught me to watch the bees fly from bloom to bloom gathering pollen. She taught me to notice the changes in scenery. She taught me to pay close attention to creation, for in this creation lies a gift. Her body now lies beneath a crepe myrtle tree, but her presence is all around.

Dad and I took long rides occasionally. He showed me some of the places he and Mom liked to visit. Sometimes the ride was to revisit fond memories, or perhaps to grieve. Sometimes the ride was to share how his soul was touched by the beauty of creation. His attempts were not lost on me. Although it may be difficult to share something so deeply personal as a spiritual experience, longing for opportunities to show loved ones places which brought joy and sorrow is ever-present.