

11 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A ride back to Rocheport inside Gary Creason's KATY Trail Shuttle

Little crumbs is how I related to them. Scattered about over the entire 225 mile stretch of THE KATY trail you will find at nearly every major trail crossing, motel lobby, diner or post office...are these hot pink (some faded...so lets say also semi-hot pink) business cards that scream our "Creason's Katy Trail Shuttle Services."

Those that may not be familiar with the phenomenon will have to know that "shuttle" providers are a known reality in any major (and sometimes minor) long distance trail. They perform all sorts of functions, from pampered to emergency... your friendly neighborhood trail shuttler can make your journey more memorable, sometimes even more enjoyable... hell in this case...even more educational.

Type in Katy Trail on any search engine on the net and you'll be inundated with mountains of info on the successful transformation from rail to now trail. You can find out the equivalent and more however by just taking a long ride with Gary Creason, king of The Katy Trail shuttle system. As his subtitle (on the pink cards) states "specializing in Shuttle Service ANYWHERE along Missouri's 225 Mile Katy Trail State Park"...and he means it. I dare ya...give him a call whenever and HOWEVER you want to tackle the Katy; 1-573-694-2027.

"That's right... anywhere!" Creason chirps as he swoops down to the Clinton Library to customize a pick-up just for me as I was finishing some blogging at the free computers there. "Told-ja I'd be here. Good to meet you!" and I must admit I instantly hit it off with the jolly troubadour of the rail-trail community.

Creason has been known to get calls at all hours of the night and he'll (for the right price - but fair of course... fair...not cheap) swoop down to the very roadside crossing, trail head or even airport... you want him to pick you up at. He'll then load you, your bike, your gear and barrel down the small roads to your destination;

"Some folks want to be picked up in St Louis and taken 225 miles to Clinton, and then be let off and begin biking or walking back towards St. Louis... and hey... no problem here!"

Creason's trajectory into the land of shuttling full time is one of those amazing "right place, right time" stories where as a handy man living near Hermann, MO he stumbled upon some bikers that needed a lift. The proverbial "lightbulb" went off and he began delivering bikes and bikers around his schedule of "paint" jobs. But before too long, the shuttling was getting in the way of the actual paint jobs and so he quit and took a leap of faith and went full time, printing the cards, setting up deals at B&B's and using his friendly demeanor to yap his way into providing more service for the bikers and hikers.

Not one trail crossing stop went by (while I was with Creason) that he didn't take the opportunity to introduce himself, ask if all was ok, and offer advice on what lay ahead on the trail. Business cards in hand, he also was at the ready to pass them out.

Along the ride from Clinton to Rocheport (which he gave me a deal on since he was already picking up others and hauling them back to Clinton) I realized I had a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge of trail culture and goings on that few people (aside from THE Encyclopedic archive that is author, Rocheport resident and KATY Trail history hound Brett Dufur) can give in rapid fire succession.

I learned of some trail politics and bureaucratic itches being smoothed out. One about a bridge that could very well undo all that has been done if not handled properly. Another story about surviving floods. Another yet about the early bikers and farmers who thought they'd be peace loving hippies tenting in large parties (that never occurred) smoking dope if they allowed the trail to be developed.

Though the ride was slow (we went on back roads mostly) as I had still been fatigued

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from barely sleeping in 30 degree weather the night before... Creason kept me alert, awake and entertained. I asked a million questions and I came away with a better understanding of the gift (or really recreational phenomenon) that is THE KATY Trail.

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10 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Day of Rain, A night at da movies, and an overnight in da cold

By 10am it dawned on me that i just wasnt feelin it. Clinton was such a big carrot at the end of this section's "stick" that once i got here, i just really didnt want to go on.

Besides overnight the warmer temperature and the sun decided to hibernate for the winter. WHAT A CRAPPY day i saw when i looked out the window. Despite that, and even though i could have stayed another hour...i was ready to make tracks towards the library...i hadnt recieved e-mail in like a week...plus i wanted to work on my blogs.

So i headed out.

At the library i inquired about that free overnight stay at the Clinton Community Center...and sure enough, the rumors were true. I was told to see "Barbara" and i later headed that way following a complimentary map i got at the motel.

Just as i stepped out of the library, all hell broke loose and the weather turned to CRAP! We're talkin icy cold rain, that although i had my rain pants on...was now soaking my shoes and getting me pretty uncomfortable.

When i arrived about a half hour later i was pretty chilled out. I signed in and was ushered around the massive complex by Barbara the receptionist, who showed me the kitchen, showers, pool, basketball court etc...and then opened a back door and showed me where i'd be tenting taht night.

I was glad when it closed. Man was it chilly. I took a nice hot shower and dried my self with only the use of a roll of paper towels i found laying around. but i was happy, warm and my heart gave a flutter when i noticed a hand dryer/blower on the wall.

BINGO! I began drying both my shoes and socks. Hot air mixed with the six days of sock wear and though it was not too aeromatic, it atleast was doing the trick. In no time my shoes were back to normal and i slapped them on and noticed the time wa evaporating!

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9 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Indian Summer on the KATY; I arrive at the end of the trail.

If anybody told me that i'd be wearing a t-shirt and shorts on this section of the walk...i would have thought they were smoking "funny cigarettes".

But sure enough. On the last day of my fall/winter crossing across Missouri...as noon hit and the sun was beaming...slowly, incrementally, one by one...the layers came off. It had to be 80. I know 70, and at 70 i always had atleast a few layers on. I was sweating. Not just from walking but from the sun...miraculously BEATING down on me!

Unbel i eveable.

Zip went he bottom of my (convertible) pants. Off came my long sleeve shirt. Free was i now to just not feel like a mummy. The downside though was that now, i was

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hauling a mega load of clothing, layers, and jackets. So my pack was weighing me down. The pace certainly slowed. I was hungrier and just burning more calories.

This might not have been my last day of my crossing but what was clear was that it would be the last day on THE KATY. I was bummin on that note. I had come to love the KATY. I, for the last 265 miles of the Worldwalk, had been "tip toeing thru the tulips..." (so to speak) nonchalantly without a worry. Comforted in the knowledge that i knew what was up ahead.

A bit different from typical Worldwalk fashion where everyday was a total surprise.

So as i walked into the town of Clinton, MO,...it was with a heavy heart and thanks to the heat...and even heavier backpack! I decided to celebrate by having an all you can eat salad bar treat with a personal pan pizza at Pizza Hut...plus a motel stay...though i could have braved it on a freebie overnight tenting outside the community center.

Not knowing what i was going to do tomorrow (i had two plans, one was to walk on, the other was to break for the year) so i decided to stay in comfort...besides as it hit me later...i reached the town too late to get my previously shipped backpack.

Cesar Becerra
Clinton, MO

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8 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Nov 8 - Sedalia to Windsor

The problem with writing these blogs so far past the time i walk is that on this very day I HAVE NO IDEA of just what i did. There were simply absolutely no libraries, or none nearby my route to use the internet so i could write each day. These are terribly small communities. Some have as little as 200 residents. i should take notes, but i am a lazy note taker, i always say i'll remember but i never do. Well a few things did stick out;

Well, i was finally walking on the section of the KATY trail where horses are allowed to walk on. though i saw no horses.

I began to see restored prairie lands, which meant long flat views of nothing but grassy ridges and scrub trees. the state of missouri actually prescribes fire burning techniques to help fight against the weeds and shade trees from overtaking this precious and historic environment.

I did see a prescribed burn actually taking place. It was prettu thnck smoke so i held my breath as i walked through it. A dude with a yellow can was actually spewing out flames taht would hit the brush and begin to burn.

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7 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day 7, Zero Day in Sedalia

The sun rose on Sedalia and luckily i had no idea it did so since my ass did not see the light f day till 12 noon! I was exhausted and it felt so good to just do nothing that for a while, well...i didnt know what i was gonna doo first. Though my plan was to rest, i did have a few thaings i needed to accomplish if i wanted to really hike light the following day. One of which was to mail some things i had collected back home. Across the street was a grocery store that low and behold had a post office inside. BINGO. I found some boxes and hauled them back to the room. On the way out and back, i realized there was athrift store just two doors down...and well you know me...i cannot refuse the allure of a thrift store!

Luckily there was a CD stand and i quickly snapped up an old George Michael CD, one of the group NO DOUBT and one of Luchiano Pavarotti. Got a kick as touring bag for

my tours and some cards.

back at the OK corral, i began organizing my things, which was so theraputic. when its in the bag i never notice how much clutter i had amassed but when i take it out, i am appaled so slowly it all went in boxes and envelopes for friends and family. While i packed and wrote letters i watched a plethora of cheesy movies on HBO and TBN and the hours just seemed to evaporate. By 4:30 my mail was done and i decided to beat the 5pm closing of the post office so i would not have to deal with that tomorrow.

While at the grocery store i treated my self to some fried chicken, which i have to admit is my all time favorite treat on the walk.

Another night of eye popping TV till 3 (AM) and i settled in, pre packed for yet another night. My feet were feeling ready to get going.

Cesar Becerra
Sedalia, MO

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6 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Nov 6th - Pilot Grove to Sedalia

This proved to be the longest day on the KATY. Though the map made it seem like 25 miles, i know full well by the end jog to my hotel...i had nearly completed 27 or 28 miles. my morning began a wee bit late. I wanted to get out by 9am but my rest at the B&B and the sheer quietness of it all had me sleep late and i sauntered away by 10am. On my way out i noticed a yard sale and could not resist a dog-eared copy of JD Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. I had recently finished a book called "At Home in the World" by Joyce Maynard, who lived with Salinger for a year of her life when she was 18 and Salinger was 35 years older. More than a lurid expose, i found the book to be quite fascinating, well written and RIVETTING...i simply could not put it down. I finished it in nearly 2 days in two sittings.

I have found that i am much more` able to read while i am on my quiet journey. This process began as i hiked the Appalachian Trail. With hours and hours to spend inside the tent and shelters along the way. I began bringing - contrary to my weight phobia of walking as light as i could - pieces of books. Even going as far as ripping apart the hard bound covers, indexes, and any other pages taht were not central to reading the actual book itself. I continue this to this very day.

Today i spent the day continuing to enjoy as well the CD albums i've been hauling now for nearly a week. I have listened to them to and fro. And quite frankly, with the exception of one or two of the CD's, i'm now growing quite bored of KC and the Sunshine Band and Justin Timberlake. A few days ago i could not get enough of them, but now i'm jonzing for a thrift shop to raid and purchase some new albums. ANY ALBUMS!

The day seemed to grow quite long, especially since originally i thought i'd be able to chill out and find a hotel in Clifton City which seemed like a major stop on the KATY, but alas, there were no accomodations and i had to press on. night caught me as i entered the outskirts of Sedalia, the epicenter of the old KATY line, with the railroad's main depot, and heart of its operations in Missouri. The only hitch in the plan was that i had no idea where the hell the hotel was that i was scheduled to stay at. And making matters more confusing was that the name had changed - as i talked to the new owner Alex - and now instead of the Show me Kort Motel it was The American Inn. Only nobody in town knew this fact so i was flying blind for a while and was increasingly growing hungry since i clocked in at least at more than 24 miles.

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The allure of an old style burger joint was enough to make a b-line and get some good old fashion grease inside my body. Underneath a sign that said "OLD FASHIONED HAMBURGERS" i stumbled in and ordered a corn dog and onion rings....and by the time i finished i had the epiphany that i was ready for a break. a real break. "Tomorrow i will take a zero" i said silently as i downed the dog and drowned the rings in red goo. MMMMMMMM, man that felt good. I think the combination of eating this forbidden fruit coupled with giving myself and off day was almost orgasmic!

I walked out a different man. Stepped up to the phone booth and called the motel with better directions and continued hobbling toward The American Motel.

Once i arrived i was greeted generously by Alex and his wife and they extended me a 30 dollar a night special. I took it, forked over 60 bucks and said "I'll take two!" Two seconds later i was in a hot shower with my crap scattered just about in every corner of the room. I dont know what it is about my pack. no matter how little i have in it, it just seems springloaded to send stuff everywhere. i watched Tv till my eyes bugged out and began contemplating the possibility of maybe slack packing tomorrow with the help of a TAXI company, but i couldnt get anyone on the phone and when i finally got a quote from one company they wanted like 60 bucks for a ten mile ride.

Screw that. it was final. I wasnt going anywhere tomorrow. Operation "total bum" was in action. My head hit the pillow and i was off to dreamland!

Cesar A. Becerra
Sedalia, MO

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5 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Booneville to Pilot Grove; Day 5 finds me surrounded by flowers!

In the morning i did what the man in the convenience store said i should do. Though it looked a bit sketchy; "just cross the golf course"....yeah, but which way.

Well i headed out and realized i was out of food so i would have to back track to the convenience store about a half mile away....so i ditched my pack under one of the gold courses mini bridges and went sans pack to get food.

If i can find a way not to carry my pack when i back track i will find some way. Food bought, pack recovered, food stuffed inside i was off.

I crossed the golf course and went up a deep embankment not knowing if i'd pop through to the trail but after a few minutes of bushwhacking there it was....THE KATY, my home and highway.

Pressed play on the CD player and i was off.

Today i would be heading to a small little town called Pilot Grove and would either stay at one of two B&B's there. I had called and left messages but nobody had called back...so i was just gonna have to take a chance. Without a tent till i got to Clinton, id have to stay somewhere.

I kept along the KATY noticing some strange trees along side the tracks. Sorta Dr. Seus like, they ended up being upon closer examination....old telegraph poles taht followed alongside the train tracks so that depots along the way can communicate information about the trains arrival etc...

Some had nothing more than the pole left. Others had the cross beams that held the beautiful glass insulators that made sure the wires crossed effortlessly without touching the wood beams themselves so as to efficiently allow the flow of

information along.

After a while i fancied taking a closer look at one. So i'd veer off the trail and try and see if one had fell on the ground. I found a few broken ones and one in pristine condition.

As i approached Pilot Grove, i noticed once again the temperature began to plummet. I noticed both B&B's were basically in eyesight of each other but no one seemed to be home at either one. So armed with both phone numbers i searched for a public phone, not an easy thing these days. Especially finding one that works. Case in point is that down the road at the local convenience store i located one, but no matter what i did....coins....calling cards...dialing 1, dialing the area code first...whatever.....nothing went thru.

I asked the store clerk and she was kind enough to let me use the store's phone.....here is what transpired next;

The first B&B owner on the phone simply stated "i'm closed for the season".

Uh oh...in my mind i had now remembered Brett Dufer's thoughts in his book on the KATY; "do not assume that accomodations will be readily available or even open, as some B&B's quickly go out of business and others simply choose to close down at their will"....it was looking like this was going to be the case.

I dialed the other B&B owner and before going too far in my explanation Delores said; "Um well, i've closed down the B&B and i'm currently now in Kansas city....why dont yu call up the other B&B" Momentarily i panicked. I was in the middle of nowhere with no accomodations, no tent, using a phone inside a convenience store (since the one outside was not working) and day was turning into night! I kindly told her that the other B&B was closed as well and it looked like i was out of options.....furthermore i explained about my walk...and out came; "well what i can do..."

Click!

The call to her cell phone dropped.....what a surprise! I love how even in this age of technology it is impossible to communicate clearly. From pay phones to cell phones.....there are days that nothing seems to be working. It certainly wasnt her fault. I waited and low and behold, she called back. Whew!

"Sorry bout that...here is what i can do. I wont be home for several hours but i know its getting cold, so i'll have my friend Joanne open the place up for yu." I thanked her profusely and added, "so do yu take credit cards?"

To which she replied; "lets not worry about that, this is a gift for yur walk." WOW. It was enough to know i'd have a warm place to stay that night...but later (after several comical attempts to open the house up - on one ocassion it looked as if Joanne contemplated going thru a window...we finally got it) i would find out the real gift of this stayover.

But first i want to expand on the deep moment i had with Joanne. Driving around her green Toyota, i felt bad when after the third try, Joanne was`at her wits end looking for the right key to open Delores' B&B. Throughout the different comings and goings, we got to chat a bit and hit it off instantly. I could just tell she was a widow...something just told me that.

Once inside, and not prompted by anything that me explaining my walk...she opened up about how special and precious life is. Out of nowhere she told me the story of loosing her husband. It was a touching moment....tears flowed readily from her eyes throught the telling and it dawned on me that at times i become for many folks a safe, unbiased and open vessel for their expressions, sorrows, life's tales etc....

Maybe its the fact that i am in their communities for a brief moment. Maybe its that

i'll never be back...so i can keep their secrets. I dont know. But it was not the first time this has happened. For some reason older folks in particular feel safe around me. Earlier that day, i needed water from a trail crossing in a tiny town, as i approached a house, i noticed an elderly, wheelchair ridden woman (easily in her 80's) who seemed to have been watching me walk thru town.

She pointed around the corner to the hose. knowing almost by sheer instinct taht i was in need of H2O. It was as if she was waiting for me. We never spoke a word. But i am after all a stranger...covered head to toe in black, a peek of my eyeglasses sticking out. I come across as the perfect poster child for 1-800-RENT-A-Burglar and yet they know i mean no harm. I am constantly asked if i feel "safe" out on the walk...being in the middle of nowhere. To which i chuckle. Cause really i think people should some how be scarred of me. I'm the wildcard. I'm the wanderer. A nomad or hobo trekking thru towns during times of the year that no other person is doing so.

In any case as with Joanne I guess people just know i'm ok. I guess i should not be surprised.

When Joanne left...after hugs and "God Bless" you's exchanged i noticed the other intriguing thing about this amazing gift. The B&B shared space with a now "FOR SALE" Flower Shop that Joanne's friend Delores owned. Surrounding me, lights low so as to almost give a feeling of an old shop of log ago were what seemed to me ...acres and acres of petals, plants, and flower arrangements that just left me in awe. More movie set than flower shop, the place was one of the more unique settings i've ever spent the night in.

I rushed up stairs and turned the heat on in my room. Took a nice hot shower and settled into my victorian-like, lace filled room...which had no less than 6 beautiful antique lamps that gave off warm and (each one different) colorful glows like no other modern lights i was accustomed to.

Definately another time warp. Another gift. Another reality i had entered...and its just the thing i strive to surround myself with. I think most of my energies have always (since my first job at 16 - as tour guide for a historic building that was the oldest home in Miami) been in seeking places that take you to another time. I dont do normal....well not "well" in any case and so i was as happy as a clam, toasty and began resting for the next day.

Cesar A. Becerra
Pilot Grove, MO

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4 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - I put old dreams back in play and walk away feeling giddy-Day3&4

Once back at Pebble Publishing i was formally introduced to Brett, the town mayor, Julie his office assistant and Kimberly their designer and editor.

I was instantly hooked with the spirit of publishing. Brett explained how he published his first version of the KATY trail guide and built the company around that. He has since written what looked like to be nearly a dozen other books on Missouri recreation, history and travel.

He actually took time to sit with me, next to a small gas fireplace and we yapped for nearly 45 minutes. About my hike (both the Worldwalk and the Appalachian Trail), his biking, my life, his running into Rocheport years back, my dreams of publishing other books...and it just seemed like we had a lot in common.

By the end of it, i asked if Kim their designer did freelance stuff and he said yes...give her a call. By then i also met Julie...a massage therapist/healer and

all around positive thinker...and really i felt like a little family was forming.

When back at the B&B i thought...why should i wait....i had for years been obsessing about my inability to finish one particular book on Frankies Pizza - the oldest pizza shop in Miami. I called the number;

"This might sound strange and i dont even know what is happening to me in this town...but can yu meet tomorrow morning to discuss a book project i might want to hire yu for?"

"Sure" said Kimberly "What time?" It was as easy as that.

Next morning we had a two hour meeting where by the end of it i had hired her and had called Miami to get materials, photos and manuscript shipped to Rocheport...in time for me to come back and make sense of it all so i can put this project to bed once and for all.

Julie, upon hearing that i was coming back...offered her home as a place to stay. "In that case" i said "Do yu all like Cuban Food?" The deal was sealed...i would be back in a week and return to Rocheport for a few days.

After my meeting i went to settle up with Gregory about the B&B stay. I handed him my credit card and he promptly handed it back. "Its on us, have a good walk!"

Wow! I was stunned once again.

Next, i was introduced to about 150 cyclists assembled and gobbling down hot dogs and burgers in the community building. My brochure, thanks to Scott the organizer of the event had been photocopied and distributed in all 300 rider packets!

I was met with applause...to which i applauded their efforts as well and thanked them for riding all day today for a cause so close to my life.

As i walked out of Rocheport i was simultaneously hit with two opposite thoughts;

"what did i just do?" and "am i crazy?" I had just put into motion a huge future project...all the while in one day...and on top of that had done so riding the wave of euphoria of seeing a new town while walking!

A part of me saw it like this; "You love new town, yu love walking....yur in a great mood when yu do both....but that does not mean yu are in the greatest mindset to make big decisions while yur mind is in the clouds!"

In any case, i knew that in a few days, when it came time for going back...if i was still excited about it all...then it was the right thing to do. So i kept walking and thinking about the future.

On this next day i walked to Boonville and arrived by night fall. I had not left Rocheport till noon so i knew i'd be late. But it was a nice different feeling entering the town by night.

Another big milestone was that i was going to cross over the Missouri River one more time. It is at Booneville where the Mighty "MO" heads north west and the KATY heads south. While crossing the new bridge i could see the old KATY "elevator" bridge - the subject of great controversy as to whether they should save it, restore it or take it apart.

The whole thing is even more sensitive because depending on hwat might happen with the legal details...other landowners along the KATY could use the case as a precedent for taking back their land. When the KATY Trail was proposed it was not all wine and roses with the landowners.

Farmers claimed that whenever the KATY ceased, the land laws stipulated that their

portions would be reverted back to them. That did not occur and though the trail is now protected, there are still some parts that if not dealt with properly...i.e. this bridge in Boonville...then old would be re-opened!

The other thought to contemplate as i strolled down main street Boonville was where exactly was i going to stay. I knew the town was big enough to have a motel or two (in fact i was initially looking for the Atlasta Motel) but i had no idea where they were located. A few locals steered me in the right direction...but that direction looked and seemed like it was gonna be another 2 miles.

But there was no choice, so i kept plodding along peering inside windowfronts with old mannequins, five and dime stores and now closed up diners featuring the "egg specials". When i have stuff to look at i dont even count or feel town miles. by then i see it as just strolling.

Still i was tired so i headed a bit out of my way...and scarily...out of the KATY's way (i would have to find out in the morning how i could get back onto it from a whole different side of town) when i stopped at a convenience store to see how close i was to the motel i was sent to.

"just down the street, yur almost there...u walkin the KATY?" came the now familiar refrain. "Yup" to which i added...do you know where it is?

"Your right next to it, when yu wake up tomorrow at the motel, just cross the golf course and bam yur on it!"

Who needs a map when yu have friendly locals. The Homestead Motel finally came into view. I checked in and crashed for the night.

Cesar Becerra
Booneville, MO

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3 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day Three; A walk into Rocheport, MO. Twenty mile day stops at 8!

We all have them. those moments in life where yu can literally look back and say; "That was a turn in the road!" When i did this, or met this person...or in my case "when i walked into this town"...my life took a little change.

Thus was the case on the third day out on my westwardly trek out of Jefferson City on the KATY trail when i reached Rocheport, MO.

But let me not get too ahead of myself since some significant happenings happened a mile or two before getting to this quaint little town.

It was yet another beautiful day. Only a wee bit warmer. Less layers. Sorta like the weather changing just before Mary Poppins woman made her grand entry to the Banks residence to take care of the little ones.

I could definately feel the sun warming things up. I was down to two layers and just my hiking pants (no leggings) and i was flying. I had to. I was looking at a questionable 20 mile day. Not that i had to mind yu. The little KATY brochure said that there would be accomodations at Rocheport. But i knew taht they'd be B&B like and i was on a budget. I mean i was willing to take on the ocassional 90 dollar a night stay but i would be careful...and if i could push on and save a few bucks i would.

But far more than budgetary affairs would stop me in my tracks (pun intended since i

walking on an old railroad bed). First there was the cliffs along side the Missouri. About 4 miles in to my day they began to get more pronounced. Jutting straight up. White and golden colored bleached rocks looking as if they were gonna tumble and crush me flat along side the river....which by this point had meandered right up close to the trail itself.

Then there was the cave. About 6 miles into my day i saw on my right hand side a rather large dark opening with a small stream flowing out. there was a sign and a small historic marker depicting Lewis and Clark's discovery (or really re-discovery) of this cave on June 7th, 1804.

What was truly unbelievably was that there was a sub section of the display that had cave drawings (pictographs i think was the term) and low and behold in the same place as where Lewis and Clark Described being a particular design (also transferred to their journals 200 years ago) WAS THE ACTUAL BOOMERANG-LIKE design on the same face of the wall 50 feet above the cave opening.

That left me stunned. I mean for weeks along the KATY i had certainly known i was retracing Lewis and Clarks campsites and turn in the bends of the river where a mast broke etc....but yu had to use yur imagination. Here was a remnant still able to be seen and if i could hover...i could even touch it.

Plus i could walk inside the same cave as they did. Well, at a risk. both to my body and my bank account. It turns out that it wasnt until i exited the cave that i read and noticed that the cave is home to a family of endangered bats. Not to mention protected!

To the tune of "\$50,000 fine to those persons found entering the cave from March to October 31st" Whew! It was now November 3rd. But still, a few days earlier and one persisent ranger later i could have been deep in debt.

Still i must admit it was a rush to walk into that cave. now, lest yu think i went a mile in...i did not. Try 25 feet....and by then it was pitch dark. My flashlight and my nerves could not make out anything. I quickly got out of there. Heart pounding but full well in the knowledge that i had had a mini adventure. A MOMENT! as i like to say from time to time....silently to myself; "Now that was a moment!"

A few feet later after crossing under a massive steel bridge i got to the town of Rocheport, Missouri where i instantly had a feeling the place was too special to be true.

First there was the old depot. A reconstruction but none-the less a bit bigger and more ornate than the rest of the mini depots the state has built at trail towns along the way.

Apparently Rocheport to Jefferson City was one of the first completed sections along the KATY when the railroad ceased to operate in 1986. About a decade later you could - as a test run of what was to come years later - ride along the same railroad grade from Rocheport into the capital. So its no wonder that Rocheport has got this KATY thing down pat.

Using the KATY as a springboard, along with a nearby winery, overthe yearws a series of quaint B&B's, antique shops, restaurants and shops have grown about the town while still having the towns character stay intact.

I visited an antique shop and meandered down the old Main Street and by hours end i found myself greeting a couple leaving a cute B&B that was situated right next to the trail. They asked if i was "doing the KATY"....but later added "where is yur bike?"

I said i was walking and we then got into the discussion i find myself having loads of times. Elaborating on beginning in Key West (to which i usually get open mouth gasps of unbelievability) my Diabetes story etc...

Next thing yu know the lady was giving me her bag of Almonds and told me that the B&B they stayed in was the coolest in town plus it was reasonably priced and most important...was not too hoity-toidy!

"Go see Gregory at the Cafe...he's a cool guy"

A few minutes later i tracked down Gregory, who despite his role as the cafes chef...sat down and chatted with me. Mentioned the bike thing...to which i mentioned the walking "thing" and the Diabetes "thing" and then he stunned me with some news.

"You'll never guess who's coming tomorrow."

Who?

"About 300 bicyclists on a bike-a-thon fundraiser for Diabetes...yu must stay!"

Gregory gave me a great deal on the B&B...half off really! So though it was 12 noon and i was only 8 miles into my 20 mile day...i decided there was something this town was trying to tell me...and i was listening!

Across the street and before i checked into the B&B (by the way Gregory said..."doors open, take any room yu want, raid the fridge".....Loved the informality of it all plus the fact that very few people lock their doors here...its like Mayberry really) i walked into a small book store called "Pebble Publishing" with a great motto;

"Other books take yu away...ours take yu there!"

I had to check this out. As i approached the building...the door magically opened in front of me. But then i noticed a guy about my height with a goa-tee and a friendly demeanor had done so. I said thank yu, he said no problem...and it was over in a second. Later i would come to find out that he was the mayor AND the owner of Pebble Publishing and THE authority and author of the definitive guide along THE KATY trail.

After i walked in...flushed with all the kindness being bestowed upon me i shouted out to the two women manning what looked like a bank of computers; "This is just the friendliest town!"

They smiled...got up and introduced themselves. We exchanged stories and i made instant friends. By the end of this day...one would be by new designer for a book i have been meaning to publish for a decade and the other would go on to invite me back to stay with her family!

Its this type of town...and it was this type of day! I was on a high. There is trail magic...which i get alot...and then there is Rocheport...which is trail magic on hyper drive!

I checked myself into my room (The Jefferson Room) at the KATY Trail Bed and Bikefest and paced around not knowing what was happening...i was inexplicably hit with a wave of energy and creativity that i had not experienced in a long time.

After downing a yogurt and diet coke. I headed back into the main street area to see what other surprises awaited me.

I was not let down. Thats for sure!

Cesar Becerra
Rocheport, MO

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2 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Hartsburg to Huntsdale; 18 miles up the KATY trail
After i bid adeau to Janet, the innkeeper at The Globe Hotel, she recommended i take something for the "road"...and so it was that i was gonna dine big time that day on two hard boiled eggs and two fresh baked muffins!

This was a treat. An unexpected one...as i was setting out to to a mega 18 miles...so i was watching the ounces. Put too many ounces together and the pounds follow. But i aquiesced and later enjoyed carrying them for a few hours.

The day was precious as it was the day before. CD player on, my feet hit the gravel and away i went. I have grown quite fond of the KATY, just about every few miles i learn more about its past. Mainly that the original Acronism was actually MKT for Missouri, Kansas and Texas railroad. The M didnt sound schazzy enough with the other two so KT stuck and thus yu have The KATY line as it was referred to.

When the railroad was being built...and if by chance the powers that be or the topography or even nearby port dictated...that there was ample enough excuse to make a small turn in the road an actual town...then THE KATY would build a depot. Whal a, over night it seems fortunes could be made even if yu didnt even own a store.

Locals were told that the railroad would pay 75 cents for each wooden tie that could be produced. There were specifications of size and width of course...but if yu could cut it, The KATY would buy it.

When i am loaded down (i'm chuckling of course - since at the airport i weighed my pack in at 15 pounds) my watch seems to just inch by, slowly...excruciatingly slow. I cant wait for 12 noon when at lunch time i down my first big meal of the day, drink a good quart of water and lessen my load by probably a pound...maybe two (that water weighs).

But after lunch the miles fly by...especially now with the CD player and the winter season fast approaching...nothing like a chilly wind to help pick up the pace.

Most of my packweight these early days of this section were actually transferred onto my body as i had as many as 3 layers on my upper body (t-shirt, long sleeve and jacket) and 2 to 3 layers on bottom (leggings and pants ...and on the ocassion of rain or high winds, i put on my stark yellow rain/wind pants).

Which is all fine and dandy when its cold, but even in November it can get a wee bit freakishly warm (more on that later).

The day was beautiful. Sun shining, crisp and lots of red tailed squirrels scurrying about. man these little critters are busy. i guess they are preparing for the winter months. back and forth they'd dart in front of me on across the trail. There red fluffy tail just flowin behind them like a feather boa on Jackie Joyner Kersey.

By 5 o'clock the sun began setting and since i was attempting to do a 20 mile day, nightfall caught me...well more like dusk...but whereas this could be a problem on road walks...i simply and safely sauntered on.

I had made arrangements from Greenfield NH a few days earlier to stay at a B&B at Huntsdale with a lady named Miss Patty at Katy's B&B. When i got there, there was no Miss Patty. The house was locked and slowly as i wolfed my dinner down the teperature dropped qui ckly!

I donned yet another layer - a 5 dollar awesome coat i scored a few weeks back in boston and out came my fuzzy gloves and rain pants. but even with two coats, though my body was toasty...slowly my feet turned to ice. i stomped on them and walked around like Frankenstein but to no avail.

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i went across the street and a king guy let me in to use the phone to call Miss Patty. miss patty's cell phone was just answering with a voice mail. So the guy called a lady that knew Miss Patty that had a key. A half hour later i was indoors, inside the B&B just as Miss Patty arrived shocked to find me inside and even more shocked and curious to find out what happened with the miscommunication...since she claimed i was not due in till tomorrow.

Miss Patty went on and on insinuating it had to be my fault. I simply didnt care. i was warm. but still she went on...to the point of making me feel a bit guilty for putting her through this stress. The point was. i was here. no harm done. i was happy. I didnt mind waiting an hour in the cold. This really wasnt my first rodeo in cold weather!

But later she put it behind her and i went upstairs and took a delicious and really hot shower. man that felt great.

Cesar Becerra
KATY Trail State Park
Huntsdale, MO

1 Nov 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - My "train trip" to Jefferson City; The Walk gains a "Soundtrack"

The light speed rail in St Louis is a gas. I love it. It goes just about everywhere. And i love that it goes right to the airport. A place i use on occasion logistically to crash at, save a few bucks on a hotel room and get the the airport early.

In this case i used it to feather the timing of my train ride back out to Jefferson City where i left off sometime in the summer.

I was excited to get back on my 17 dollar train ride. And very much bummed when to my horror, there was "maintenance" being done on the line so everyone had to board a coach bus to jeff Ci ty.

My spirits came back up when i noticed little by little that the bus was actually following the same route of my walk along the KATY trail and so i got to see towns i previously walked through...by car....only about 10 feet higher in the air...since i was on a bus.

I saw the trail quite a bit. B&B's i stayed at...hell even stealth campsites i set my tent up at. That really got me into the spirit of things. not that i needed any more pumping up....but seeing this sent me even more over the edge.

Once in Jeff City, i called a cab and 5 dollars and 15 minutes later, i was alone...on a chilly but sunny day...at the North Jefferson Trail head. The last time i was here is was blazing hot. i was in shorts and a t-shirt. now i was bundled up head to toe with two layers of pants on bottom and three layers on top. gloves and a balaclava (head scarf - think quasi bank robber).

The only difference this time is that i got to push "play" before i headed out. and in my ears, as the crunching of the gravel ceased to crunch...Tracey chapman's old album "new beginning" began to give the walk an epic quality.

I had decided at the very last minute before leaving Greenfield, NH...to in fact take my 9 dollar CD player walkman. This is a radical departure from my anti-technology stance.

For years folks had asked me; "so do you have a cell phone or an I-pod?" To which i'd answer "no" and wax poetically and high falootenly about "zen like walking" and wanting to "detox and unhook myself" from the modern world.

For now i will say, i loved my music, jamming each day and i effortlessly strolled

without concentrating on mileage or on a more detached note; the natural surroundings.

But i took this as an experiment. and yu will no doubt hear more about my views and how the music "hit" or "helped" me.

The first day was a ten miler to a small community called Hartsburg.

Hartsburg has two claims to fame. OK maybe three. One of which was that is was a charming little community along the KATY trail. Two; Hartsburg has a major Pumpkin Festival (that i just missed) each year that draws over 30,000 people to a community that has less than 1000 residents! And three; Hartsburg is not a place that will fold and flee.

I'm talking about the great flood of 1993 that hit the town so devastatingly that many would have found it easier to morph the town into a main street aquarium and rent out scuba gear.

No less than 9 feet of water stood inside many of the historic homes. one of which was The Globe Hotel and B&B, the town original hotel when the railroad first came thru in the 1890's.

Janet, the current owner of the property (and a kind soul who gave me a discount on the stay) remembers the agonizing horror of watching the Missouri River rize ever so slowly as she evacuated all contents from the first floor of the Globe hotel....now her newly aquired B&B!

"The entire place was a swamp. I had to start over. Every bit of it." A shock to my ears as i sat there in her once innundated dining room nibbling on muffins and yogurt.

She showed me pictures. much of which looked like a bad dream or a well photo-shopped gimic. But it was not fake. This really happens every now and then. But hopefully, thanks to a new concept of creating large wetland pools along the way (massive diked earthworks along the Katy Trail itself), subsequent floods have not neared the town as much....but then again yu never know when the next massive one will come.

But i was really just touched by the spirit of community of how little Hartsburg banded together, filled thousands of sandbags, rowed hundreds of miles (collectively) to shuttle people back and forth...and lastly....DID NOT LEAVE Hartsburg after the waters receded.

Cesar Becerra
Hartsburg, MO

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31 Oct 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Worldwalk Begins again; I "commute" back to my other life!

At 4:15am, i could hear the squeal of Jen's alarm clock next door and i knew it was time to go. I was in the deepest of sleeps so it took me a while to put my clothes on, saunter downstairs and schelp way too much hiking gear to her car through the chilly air.

I was to head out on a flight from Manchester NH to St Louis on the first leg of a long commute to get to Jefferson City and begin the hike anew.

Jenn had become by now my designated "limo" driver. on each of the three occassions i needed to be picked up from the airport, Jenn and her trusty grey chariot was my magic carpet.

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Even at 4:30 in the morning we jammed to a plethora of 80's and 90's hits while i rehashed all the great times i had had at Greenfield and while Jenn scarfed down her Coco puffs and milk while driving the windy roads with her knees!

By 5:30 i was at the Airport. A last hug and i was on my own, checked my luggage in, boarded the flight and went right to sleep.

While landing in St Louis i could actually see the rout my little legs took as i crossed the Mississippi. I noticed clearly from the air...the bombed out looking main streets of East St Louis, i could see the Eads bridge, The Arch...hell even the Greyhound Station i had used so much to go back and forth between breaks.

This is the real gift of walking through a city or across a long stretch of earth...slowly....yu end up noticing every detail from the air.

No longer is St Louis just another big City. Its rather small in my opinion...maneagable...its layout predictable...a place i can even call a temporary home if i'm stranded on a flight or want to spend a few days killing time there.

case in point;

I had a day to kill and so i went to may favorite Theatre at The Park Plaza hotel, saw two movies back to back (The Prestige anduh crap i forgot the other) then went next door to the Library and watched jack nickolson in The Shining!

The rest of the evening i spent catching up on reading at Lambert Field (Airport) where i was perfectly comfy due to my earlier foresight of pillaging a few "complimentary" Southwest Airline blankets! I took three...which was a good thing cuz one blanket is the equivalent to rice paper.

My mind wandered in and out from a great book i was reading to the excitement to revisiting the Katy Trail. i slept about 5 hours by 5 am i was ready to go!

Cesar Becerra
St Louis, MO

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20 Oct 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Tribe; My family in the woods.
Its hard to say where the line exists between Natures Classroom camp and camp "Life" at Natures Classroom.

I'm speaking of course between the two worlds of the campers. On the one half you have the world of the cute little campers...little munchkins who haul half their homes in oversized suitcases for three nights of camping in \$40,000 cabins with heat and showers.

And the other hand you have the world of the "bigger kids" (but kids none-the-less) that come to camp for 3 months in an effort to escape, connect, and promote the impossible.....environmental enlightenment in an age of modern-day apathy!

Where they collide is the finest line between decorum and honest reality. In other words...that of professional education and that of downright elementary level shenanigans.

We are a wacky bunch. We come from all backgrounds. (I am in my mind envisioning the ending of The Breakfast Club as i type) The world sees us as;

One newly graduated college student with massive debt to pay off on student loans.....two obsessed, stuck in the 80's Journey fans who's eyes and hearts grow

weak for Hollywood romance endings. A farmer who can build just about anything. A rabid environmentalist who one day will start her own alternative school. An equally rabid Steelers Fan. A former couch potato who now cant stop walking away. A nomadic Clara Barton who has been treating injuries for half a century. And lastly, a guitar playing pirate who will probably set a record for the world's earliest mid-life crisis.

This new family of mine has indeed touched my heart.

Our tightly knit unit was best tested at this weekend's "ALL-SITES" weekend workshop where all the Natures Classrooms got together to meet, learn how to teach new classes and generally be as zany and unscripted (not to mention as raw and roudy) as we could possibly be.

I'm being modest here when i say raw; it was a no kid/camper zone....so the foul language and innuendos flowed as freely as the beer which was on-tap (night one) and in every color and variety (as night 2's fire side bacchanalia attested to).

Since it was close to Halloween each site choose a group costume. We were simply "Gang-Green", (double meaning on Gangrene) dressed all in green....painted warts and all.

Gang Green did not win the pumpkin contest....but its safe to say that few will ever forget the lower depths of raunch we (as a team) accomplished with a few well positioned "engorged guords".

Gang Green did not win the box car contest either....but no other crew sported a chariot with golden rockets that dramatically fired their boosters (once, ten feet into our 20 foot run and again after we carried our car down as a team down the meandering course).

Simply put. We were a different species all together. And man were we cool. How cool....you might ask?

When the coolest of the cool, outspoken NC veteran and my foul mouth/thoughts pal "Coach" (think 13 year old looking Italian Boy) answers the following question

"If you had a chance to fill up a bathtub with anything what would it be?"

with her answer simply being

"The Entire Staff of Greenfield"

Then you know your doing something right. And "Coach" is no bland chomping, run of the mill conservative who likes her Ice Cream Plain. If Coach says she'd like to fill her bathtub up with the entire staff of Greenfield....then....we is cool!

Team Greenfield is cool cuz we got dimensi on. Some would claim dementia!

Since we are in the forest it is not too far out to quote from that joly green Ogre "Shrek" who said "people are like onions.....they have layers"

Aint that the truth...and we have-em in spades.

My six weeks here (really just 4 but i spent two weeks away reflecting on the place/experience) have relit a fire that was admitedly set to "simmer".

I sometimes am so close to the flame of my loosely lived world that i forget just how unique the charachters are who inhabit it. I have always said that living such a radical life has its price. The biggest of which is folks staring at you funny or not really "getting it".

But it is in clumps like these, surrounded by like-minded nomads....that one can

re-strengthen the resolve to go on and know that you are not odd for wanting more than a 9 to 5. That you are not odd for living in a parallel yet fantasy like existence of lesser responsibilities. etc, etc.

Nope. Your not odd at all. Because now you know there are others. Perhaps at different stages of their journey but none-the-less...cut from the same cloth.

I will be honest and say that my mind is cluttered at this very time...there are simply too many wonderful acts of friendship and generosity to make sense of now.

My heart is too full for other reasons too. I can see that the time is so ripe for re-beginni ng my walk.

I am careful of course to take care of both my health and safety when i'm off the worldwalk. Any new endeavor is a risk and this is not different. But still i'm cautious....maybe too much so. Which is why i hesitated and originally declined to be the driver of our box car when Christina ended up not being able to go to All Sites.

I just was fearful about something drastic happening to my body just one week before i beagn my walk again. I mean this thing was solid, but it had no breaks and no trial runs and lastly at the very last second we noticed that the steering column was slipping. There was no telling what would happen.

But it dawned on me that i was being a hipocrite in the sense that i am not a spectator in this life. We either choose to stay off the moving conveyor belt of life or we get in and on and RIDE! I choose in the end to ride.

Gold helmet donned. Three pillows duct taped around me and what looked like a fire proof white race car drivers suit...on me....I pushed off the line....and....for ten feet i knew nothing of how my future would unfold.

I'd either be in the woods with a hundred pound box car in a million pieces or eating a steel piped steering column.

Ten feet later and just after i engaged the rockets (for added visual effects) the entire contraption came to a halt. The tire had bent in and we'd be forced to carry it down the hill as a team.

I was safe. In one piece.

But the point is...i could have ended up in the hospital. Now i'm not fishing for bravery props (ok, maybe i am) but it could have gone either way. I was proud that i was willing to take that leap.

My next act of bravery is getting back out into the unknown.

It has been months since i was out in the middle of farm fields...and my soul is missing the opportunity to disconnect once again and sift through and organize the many moments that have transpired since i last shook the gravel from my shoes on an old railbed in Missouri.

I bought some new shoes not too long ago. They were a stretch. Not only did i buy ones with hot red laces but the bottoms have a tread apply entitled "waffle stompers"!

More plastic cleats than treads really (lots of space in between each waffle cleat). But now i'm realizing that the more space there is on the sole of my shoe the more room for future moments to lodge themselves into.

There was once a time i was letting in these moments by the dozens. But they were superficial and my treads were narrow and closed off.

I feel re-opened. Much of that has to do with a place on the banks of Otter Lake in the forests of southern New Hampshire.

Cesar Becerra
Greenfield, NH

PS. In a few days i will be shoving off once again and flying to St. Louis then i will board Amtrak to Jefferson City... hail a cab.... and will be back on the KATY Trail and The World Walk.

Depending on libraries.... i will be blogging either daily or every other day. So stay tuned....

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22 Sep 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - We have no ORT, No schedules, no kiddies.... till Monday; Last day

A clean shaven Sunny (well at least each half of his face - he left a goatee) entered the dining hall to eruptions of laughter giggles and clapping.

The kids had done it. The previous evening they ended up having no ORT (left over food, the word comes from a medieval term that means table scraps) and so per Sunny's (our magnanimous leader and camp manager) promise ... the beard came off.

I unfortunately was the bearer of bad news as i gave "the Ort Report" after i yelled "what time is it" and 68 little ones screamed back "Time for the ORT report." I gave a wee bit of a lecture amidst a wave of "awww's" since they left 6 pounds behind... and pep talk that they shouldnt just give up after they reached the zero mark, but that they should strive to do this everyday... even at home.

The kids woke up extra early to haul all their gear and luggage to the bus. Some were not excited to leave. And many gave me hugs... especially the group from Olivia's skit.

I had witnessed lots of kids this week as they explored the outdoor and science worlds. Size 4 and 5 Nike Environmentalists in Abercrombe clothing. Cute as buttons, meaner than snakes, shy as butterflies and all curious to different degrees.

A few key moments:

A girl, practically in pig tails with a little rotund body pausing each 4 minutes in the woods to retrieve her mini video recorder which always seemed to dissappear in her little pink backpack. She was mesmerised by small mushrooms.... all of which were the same variety it seemed. She rolled film, on something taht just stood there. Time and time again.

The antsy pantsy bad boy with whispy blonde hair who just had to be cooler than all

the others. He wasn't necessarily like my next observation (the non-social) as he was always definitely competitive. But the bad boy was dangerous since you had to be careful to keep him on a short leash since that behavior is catchy.

There was the non-social kid (both boy and girl) who just didn't care. Never focused on what was happening. Was always digging in the sand, snapping twigs, completely faced around so that there back was to all the action going on. The counselors worked hard to just have them "sit up", "turn around", "please stop kicking that rock" and the infamous "so what do you think?"; and the answer "I don't know."

There was the sparkler (mainly a girl). Who was just as happy as happy can be. Think perpetual cart-wheeler and dimples-a-plenty, who was always first to volunteer, to answer, to shout out at the top of her lungs; "Look at me, look at me"

But in all they were 6th graders from The Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School who came and had an amazing experience.

One kid in particular I had the chance to shadow a bit here a bit there throughout the week... his name was Jessie.

Jessie stood out for several reasons. Number one, he had long hair done up in a pony tail. Two, though I did not inquire as to his ethnicity... I believe he was of hispanic background (now I could be wrong)... and three, Jessie had a teacher (Dana) assisting him throughout the week.

Jessie has Asperger Syndrome (forgive my spelling) which is like saying he is Autistic but not quite. Maybe just shy of it.

I met Jessie first on Erin's and Martin's hike around the lake. I did not intentionally know I would meet him but as I rounded a corner of trees, it seemed as I was having a most unusually easy time maneuvering on a trail I had just previously thought quite overgrown.

And then the mystery cleared itself. Branches were acquiescing before me. Only this time I saw that a small hand was helping branches magically free my trajectory.

That hand was Jessie's. A sweetheart of a kid whose world no doubt has been widened because of this. That is not to say it's all roses. On another day I witnessed Jessie becoming frustrated on the ropes course where he was the last to try and swing into the center of his waiting friends.

He tried, but on each take-off his feet hit the ground. "I told you I couldn't do it" he spat out to his friends with a bit of venom in his aura. "I just can't."

Erin brought over a rock for him to get higher up on the swinging rope. He tried again and came close. Close enough for the group to let out a cheer of congratulations. But Jessie wasn't having it. Jessie knew his feet had touched and to him, he had not accomplished what the others did.

Jessie doesn't want to be treated differently due to his differences and challenges. He taught us all a very valuable lesson. At least I caught it. To succeed by bending rules is to fly without soaring.

It was not easy for him to walk away. At least it was not easy for me to see his frustration, but I got it. And I get also that Jessie knows to succeed in the right way, under the right rules... just like everybody else. I think we all take for granted and strive to be better than others sometimes. In Jessie's world, he simply wants to be the same as you and me.

I am vehemently independent... sometimes to a fault. But when I succeed and accomplish on my own... there is just nothing like that feeling. And though I have help and loved ones who cheer me on... at times I want to do it alone "thank you very much!" All a Jessie-style.

Next week when 130 kids show up and take over our every available minute and test our patience, i will think of Jessie and make sure i dont bend the rules for the weaker campers. If i do i will be cheating them on that pride.

When i began this week i was just but a sponge. Going here going there, shadowing my peers. I was exposed to alot and at first felt overwhelmed, but i now know that that was probably not the greatest thing to do, cuz it gave me the impression that i have to know it all. All the classes, all the field excercises.

But really, all i have to do is focus on my core group. Prepare the night before and just connect with the kiddies. I might not be blogging as much or often when Monday rolls into Friday. I am after all working next week...as a camp counselor at Natures Classroom.

And i am so jazzed.

I'm staring out on Otter Lake, watching the lake settle into glass as i am thinking about kayaking again as i did last weekend.

The crew has set out in different directions after we cleaned up the site and had our final meeting. It is almost 6pm but tonight there is no Waitrons, or ORT report or night hikes.

All is quiet next to the docks. And i can hear the battle of sounds beginning...in one corner a heavy, healthy, happy pumping heart and in the other corner or all around...the magical sounds of birds, critters, water and wind that calms, soothes, settles and educates us all about the true meaning of life.

Cesar Becerra
Greenfield, NH

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21 Sep 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Staff Sillyness, Black Ants and 9 Little Cesars; Day 5 at NC

Its been a pretty heavy week...for me on a philosophical or whatever level taht hits yu when simple things take on lots of emotional weight.

I'm not into psychology (i might have even misspelled it there) but i'll just say amongst the heavy for me was heavy responsibility for the staff.

They have long days. Yes i have experienced them while touring little ones of this age for www.goeft.com but i get massive breaks. These guys and gals get half an hour here and a half and hour there, but trust me, they go by like in 5 minutes it seems.

So wackyness is a big byproduct of it all. From "smoke em if yu got em...Leave No Trace...peace piping" (no further comment thatn that) to "dude who fucking shoe is that smelling up the house" comments as well as this classic one from Jen last night; "man my leg hairs are gettin way long."

Yup, we staff members act the epitomy of angels in the main part of the day but after hours and during breaks we curse like sailors, scratch previously unscratchable places (not recommended to be performed in front of the kiddies) and sometimes contemplate the future; "dude, i love this but i think this is my last season."

After the kids are put to bed we congregate in the main staff house inside the Aquatic Center and check our e-mail (if any body is lucky enough to pry the keyboard from my cold dead hands - hahahaa - imagine menacing laugh), eat semi healthy junk

food, toss back some locally brewed beers and veg out on the porch overlooking Otter Lake...until someone asks..."uh what time is it" and an answer comes back "five till" then backpacks and counselors scurry to their next classes.

The entire week has been building up to a game called Predator and Prey or simply "Pred/Prey" where teams of 10 take on certain animal groups such as Hawks (the top of the food chain) down to Ants (the group I got to lead) which unfortunately get eaten by everybody.

Which created a challenge for me. Is there a way my population could survive the onslaught of snakes, hawks etc..

Well yes, by doing what ants do best; hide!

The game works as the groups go around the property trying to "refuel" at certain trees surrounded by colored duct tape...signifying shelter (grey), food (red) and water (green). Once you get to each tree, you sing a song, collect two points and away you go to get the next one. But as you walk you could be eaten...that happens when one group higher than you on the food chain approaches another and both counselors freeze both groups...a whistle is sounded and then the chase begins.

If you are tagged, you have to go to the other team. I take it there seldom are any ants left. But our combined strategy - I must admit I helped author it - was to go from one source of food, water or shelter...steal thy to the other.

Basically instead of using the trails or road access we bushwhacked it straight thru the forest so that we were invisible to our predators. It worked. We were only attached twice and lost only 5 "ants". On one occasion 5 of us hid behind a massive rock outcropping till we knew the predators had walked by us.

On another occasion we hid behind the dumpsters, little feet and hands holding tight to elevate themselves above the small gap at the bottom of the fence...as the hawks went by us.

If one shoe was spotted they certainly would have made a B-line to us and we would have been...well dinner!

On my walk early on in the day as I was checking out the ropes course training, Olivia's group stopped me to ask if I would not mind being made fun of.

Each Thursday Night is a phenomenon called TNL, Thursday Night Live...which is basically a talent show.

The campers can poke fun of any of the counselors or impersonate them on stage but they must obtain their permission. I said "sure" but added, "what do you have in mind"

They gave me a scenario and I was instantly hooked...so much so that I volunteered to join their group and help develop some of the ideas of the skit.

I'm telling you I am bouncing off the wall in anticipation to get my hands on my very own group of campers. just a few more days. Though next week is looking like a zoo. 120 kids, 18 counselors...chaos city...but exciting.

So the skit goes like this. The kids come in and act as if they are at breakfast then one of them impersonates Jen, advertising their class with her ending line as "and if you don't want to take how to wash dishes then you can take a class with Roy", then another child says the same, adding "and if you don't want to take that class you can take a class with Cesar"

By then a kid named Nick, who is a total hip-hopper, comes out in my glasses, hat and full attire with a trail of long hair made from tissue paper and begins teaching a mock class how to dance hip hop. "no, No No...that's not the way...focus and do it

JUST LIKE (pointing at himself) ME" at which point Lady Sovereign (a british female rapper) begins to blast out of the sound system and 8 other identically dressed little Cesars pop out to join the dancing which ends with them in a breakdancing floor spin.

All are wearing my actual clothing i have donned this week and all have my same style hat, glasses and the tell tale whisp of long black hair.

The effect sent Olivia and I in convulsions of laughter and the same happened later when the skit aired in front of the group. I was honored to have had the opportunity to work on it with them.

The day ended with an exploration of the nearby town of Petersborough...well maybe exploration is too harsh a term...we visited a pub o their main street.

I had a glass of wine and on down the line my new co workers (Roy, Erin and Martin) had beers. The place was practically empty but warm and homey and of course so, sooo New Hampshire like.

Erin, a Mainer (one of the hardy bunch - she was wearing sandals on a 40 degree night) - that is from the great state of Maine...asked about her chances of doing the Appalachi an Trail.

I told her blank...yu'll do it. i just know. Her beer bottle cap message had an inspiring message that said the same thing.

I answered more questions from her as we drove back home and all walked back through the night. And though i can help people with a million gear related hiking questions...i know that that is only part of the equation for completing the AT.

"Its not about the equipment." I expressed to her and the guys..."The real question is are you ready, is it the right time to go...hike, think, reflect?"

Its a timing thing really. Funny thing is though i could probably technically hike the entire trail again...another part of me knows not only is it not the right time but that i've conquered that challenge.

I'm climbing other "mountains" in life.

One step at a time!

Cesar Becerra
Greenfield, NH

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21 Sep 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Continued from Sept 20th; Dangling by a rope.
this blog posting continued from Sept 20th, so read previous one below first!

At this point as Erin and I extracated Roy from the melee of the rope monster, a queasy look came over Erin's face as she looked me straight thin the eye, and i to hers and we both mouthed something like "oh shit, this is not going to work."

Roy caught on and calmly mentioned (mind yu as he was stuck, back facing the water, hands holding onto the rope we strung across and feet mired in rope; "This is going to be alright. No problem."

Roy taught is alot that day. In fact, i should very well have known that (that all will work out) only its been so long since i hiked the Appalachi an Trail or had a tough day on the World Walk that i have forgotten taht lesson.

Slowly, we got him out, and slowly we rebuilt that thing, strung it together. Parents waded in. WE formed a chain of spotters including myself, a parent named Rolph, Martin and Erin, and one by one they crossed.

We made sure their steps on the bottom rope would not swing out. We cheered them on. Coached them. And the ropes held. Ironically all ended into Roy's waiting arms to get them down. My personal hero of that day. Not because of his rope-bridge building techniques...but because of his overwhelming positivity in the face of what looked like a losing proposition.

I was in the water nearly 2 hours, since afterwards, we took Roy's kids (piggy back style) over the river so they would not have to cross over twice. Then as Roy's kids finally made it over, Cristina's and Jen's groups showed up, so I volunteered to stay on as I help cross them over.

By then my feet and legs were just sooo numb. But I was so jazzed by it all that I was just on a high. I hiked back and changed just in time for the next swath of classes, where I witnessed Jen's Roller Coaster program, Martin's fishing journey and Roy's "Lets Get Lost" compass program (which by the way I was finally and formally taught about compasses).

Later that night at dinner and during another fine romp with my ole gal "hobie" I witnessed some major mojo flyin in the form of a primo dish washing artiste. I'm talking about Olivia, the flying dutchess of dish separation and plastic cup stacking.

As hobie spit out her dirty dishes, Olivia morphed into a madwoman capable of giving the Tazmanian Devil a run for his money as she just unloaded, sorted, stacked dishes, silverware and cups at un-human speeds.

I dont know what got in her coffee or if she took Sunny's end of day comment "smoke-em if yu got em" a wee bit too seriously...not too menti on a few hours shy of clock-off time, but this gal was possessed.

I think I even saw her hand turn all Willie E Cayote on me and blur into a mess of movement. But the rest of her body and face were still. I commented this to her and she told me bout her past job at Friendly's restaurant and her intimacy with all things Hobart related.

After dishes were done, I was just in time to catch Erin nail the entire day on the head by sharing a quote (from the Greatful Dead) that went too well with where I began this essay;

"Once in a while you are shown the light in the strangest of places if yu look at it right."

She wasnt kiddin g.

From Christina's Rhodopson night-light show to seeing the positive when all looks negative...I must admit at times it is I who thinks he is as much a camper or even more so than the kiddies taking all this in.

Its heavy to me. Probably because its a real silly dream come true. My one missed possibility of going to a camp like this was back in 6th grade when Cypress Elementary had their annual one week trip to The Everglades.

I missed it. Well, better yet or more specifically, my mouth made me miss it. I couldnt keep it shut. I got in trouble and was not allowed to attend the trip. Now, I'm going to be entrusted with opening my mouth and sharing my expertise.

But that's a week away. For now my ears are like satellite dishes and my eyes like hub caps. I'm taking it all in...quietly...strattling two worlds; one, a childhood

re-lived, the other ... a new adventure along side Otter Lake.

Cesar Becerra
Greenfield, NH

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20 Sep 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Seeing the light...at night and during water crossings.
NC Day 4

"There are several parts of the eye that affect our vision, and they all affect the way we see."

Begins the section in the yellow manual i'm rading through slowly in my training week. I got to see the night walk in action as i followed Christina's group into the woods at the tail end of Tuesday.

The entire properties lights had been shut off in preparation to teach the kids about night vision. Christina began with a talk about retinas and pupils and eyeballs in general.

The most intruguing part to me was the detail about a chemical called Rhodopsin that is produced bty the rods of our eyes. Basically it produces the image of what we see onto our brain. A sort of power point presentati on happening simul taneously and in real time as moving film.

These rods are not used during day. So Rhodopsin helps send those images into the brain when light is low or in pure darkness. In other words our own night vision goggles.

You have to have faith with Rhodopson, since it is not allways on 100% when the lights go off. That explains why its hard to see once the lights abruptly go off but in a few moments - and little by little - our eyesight gets better....even in darkness.

It take about a full 45 minutes for the Rhodopson levels to reach the point where we can make out images and shapes even details...in the dark. Which is why, approx 45 minutes later after walking into the woods though a drizzly night (as long as it is not thundering or lightening, the campers still go out) Christina stopped the group to give some great examples of different types of "light" (or illumi nescence of all kinds).

At first she illustrated Tribolumi nescence by having the kids chew on wintergreen lifesavers. The kids in pure darkness stretched out their hands to recieve what christina was labeling "moon rocks". A few crunches later, as the wintergreen oil in the lifesavers mixed with the sugar - also in the lifesavers - a small fireworks show exploded in their mouths as they each oohhed and ahhed and proceeded to ask Christina for more moon rocks.

I suspect that if the counselors wanted to make a few extra bucks, all one would have to do is sell "moon rocks" on the trail during night walks. This kids loved that.

Next up; Piezoelectr icity, which is caused by energy released by the motions of electrons. I have no freakin idea how Christina pulled this one off but she asked for a water bottle and pulled something from out of the air and next thing you know...poof...a mini rave show was swishing about the bottle.

A few experiments later (including quartz rocks rubbed together which spawned another mini light show) Christina ended with the mother of all endings when she asked everybody to close one of the their eyes and cover it...while she lit a candle...which practically blinded everybody.

"This is the most powerful light in the universe... especially with all the Rhodopson you have built up." I could just barely hear the gears shifting as the lesson began eally seeping into their brains. "Now, on the count of three open the other eye." One... two... (at this point she blew out the candle)... three"

More ooohs and ahhs. Done properly and i am proud to say i followed all the rules... two kids did not... you can still see the woods pretty good in one eye but half the woods were dark. One eye - theone staring at the candle - had lost all the Rhodopson it was making in preparation to see at night. The other, still saw clearly.

Hmmm i'm beginning to think these arent yurrun of the mill camp counselors here but fairy folk with magical powers. How else could you explain a "bridge" i was forced to make the very next day... a "bridge" of rope and faith as we finished a long 2 hour hike around Lake Otter.

I had a ball taking over Erin's and Martin's groups for a few brief minutes and discussed Leave no Trace camping/hiking and a hands on (well feet on) example of trudging through a stream when you have no choice.

I wont go into all the details but it was a simple technique i picked up in Maine as there is no other choice but to wade though nearly 70 some odd streams and rivers or just marshes where the trail crosses over.

So i proceeded to explain to the kids that although they have the luxury of staying dry today i'd sacrifice my dry shoes and pants to illustrate what do do if you did have to ford a stream.

"First, take off your shoes and socks. Then put back on your shoes... sockless. Cross over safely. When finished"... and throughout this i waded thru, got shoes and pants wet as half the group slivated (some boys and girls i'm sure have been dying to do just this) and the others recoiled as if it was always possible to keep shoes dry.

"When finished" as i then sat down, i pulled out what looked like two bread bags from this mornings breakfast... "then dry your feet, put back on your dry socks and do you think i should put my dry sock back into my wet shoe?" They all said no. Then i countered "Why"

"Because you will get your socks wet" said one girl. To which i challenged "so what will happen if i get my sock wet and have to walk on?" BLISTERS came back a chorus of littleones that understood.

"Yup. Blisters. And that's no fun. So before i put my dry sock back in my wet shoe i will slip them into these bread bags or any plastic bag to give a moisture barrier so that the wetness from the shoe doesnot transfer to the sock."

I laugh at this now cuz after lunch there werent enough bags to keep my feet wet as we got to a stream crossing next to a beaver dam that Erin and Martin had decided we would cross with the help of Roy's group and a pre planned planting of ropes to make a bridge.

The scene was this. Twenty kids on one side and ten on the other. in between was about 3 to 4 feet deep stream crossing... and lots of confusion as to what would happen next... especially from the faces of the adults.

Since water activities are not covered in the Natures Classroom Insurance Policy, no one is allowed i it. So we'd teach the kids to walk over it. Well... i must admit in the beginning it came across like it was not going to be so easy.

As Erin slipped into the water to retrieve the big rope from Roy, she underestimated just how deep the water was and got a jolt of cold-ass water up to her... well up to her ass.

I saw her reaction and it was evident that the few first jolts of jitters began crossing her mind. We then tried tying the rope from one massive tree to another but the rope was not long enough. All that was left was a medium/small one that even I and a few of the parents wondered if it would hold up for such a crossing.

The comical thing in my mind is when Erin mentioned - in an effort to settle down the chatter level of this big group of 6th graders - "now here is a great example for you all to witness the workings of our team" (many lessons reinforce the team spirit between the kids, but in this case it was up to us to put this thing together)...never mind that we had never really built a bridge together as a team, at least not this team.

I didn't say a word, but quickly waded in and we began lashing, stretching, making all sorts of knots...but not necessarily the knots Roy was shouting out to make.

Then it happened...probably the worse thing you could have go down as a positive image and reinforcer that crossing this bridge was no big deal...as Roy began his way across, his balance was thrown and he swirled over the side but hung on just inches from the water as Erin and I stabled him.

By then Roy's foot was caught. In unison, a group gasp was emitted from campers who just previously had a hard time keeping still or quiet. We now managed to shut them up, only the scene in front of them that captured their attention must have sent butterflies through their stomachs; a basic "you want us to go across that!"

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19 Sep 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - ShivR me TimbRs! A Hobart's Life for me...Day 3 at Natures Class

Its called "America's Thrift Store" and for once I'll agree with that. This place is beyond massive.

The last thing I needed to be doing in Chattanooga, TN before heading up to Greenfield, NH was buying any more clothing.

But I'm an addict. Well, of thrift store finds. With a twenty dollar bill I feel like Paris Hilton in...well PARIS!

I filled my cart heavy, beyond the top. I'd only walk out with 4 items but my policy is to scour the racks for anything...I mean anything that catches my eye.

One item was this big ass canvas-like smock of a shirt with missing buttons from the Gap. Slowly I tried things on. I'd put the canvas shirt aside, and one by one ditched all but a few pieces. On one occasion I said "what the hell am I gona do with this weird shirt?"

So in and out the ditch pile it went. It was 6.99...far too much than I was willing to pay for it. So I took it to the counter and asked for a discount due to the fucked up buttons.

Nope! The steely eyed manager said. So I put it aside and thought again about not bringing this schmatta into my life. But it was too weird, too cool (maybe) and in the end I said "what the hell" and bought it.

I hauled it up to New Hampshire for some reason and that reason became clear today as the camp counselors were promoting "national Talk Like A Pirate Day"

Now who the hell comes up with these "national" days is beyond me. I'm wondering how much debate went into this. Were the lobbyists from the "national slice a Cucumber Day" a little less savvy than the Pirate speaking folk.

Or did ole peg Leg Pete make them walk the plank and "Arrrrrrrr take yur silly ole cucumber peels a whith ya.... thank yus very much! Ok Mates, off to the carribean fur sum plunderin and pillaging!"

So i donned the great big ole America's Thrift Store Canvas shirt and it had the perfect (in my opinion) aura of a pirate like look. I tied my Fossil belt around the waist, slipped on my two dollar Ambercrombie and Fitch shorts and borrowed a red scarf from Erin and whala.... instant pirate.

The look was completed at breakfast time when i slipped off the eye glasses and slipped one of my ear bags (ear warmers i use when hiking in winter, see www.earbags.com) under my bandana so that it covered my right eye to resemble yur typical /steroetypical pirate's eye patch.

In any case my outfit came in handy as Jen began the day with pirate jokes and sayings while i slid in line to be introduced as "Ole captain ORT"

ORT being the terminology given to the weighing and wasting of extra food not eaten after every meal. Each day, to reinforce the issue of waste and the effort it takes to get food to the table.... the meal's extra food is collected and weighed so as to inspire the campers to eat up all they place on thier plate.

So i gave my "Mornin laddies, i'm-a lookin fur sum hardie maties to man mee ole brig and ply the waters of Biscayne Bay for booty and plunderin....but i need to know yur healthy mates that can eat all yer food."

Well, something like that (at least that is the general gist of my tirade).

The poundage unfortunately clocked in at 15 pounds of extra food. Not good. Yesterday's dinner was at 10. So the pressure is on for the next meal.

Speaking of....at lunch today i saw her across the room again. Same corner, same beautiful steaming hot frame i remember from the day before.

I cant help it, this girl has me under her spell. But today i was determined to get to know her a little better. You know....work my charm.

So after lunch i shimmed up quick, donned a plastic apron (you want to be protected in general in this day in age so always go waterproof) and let Erin know i wanted to do the spritzing of the plates. All other items just get shoved in. But the plates have to be spritzed free of food....using hot water.

Mind you, not hotter than what hobie can put off. Ha! Nothing is that hot. But its pretty steamy. And the kicker is that along the assembly line, spritzing gets ya right up next to hobie.

So there i was. Rubber gloves, plastic apron and hot nozzle in hand....spritzing away and sending dirty dishes right into hobie's awaiting embrace.

Once the dirties started comin, they came hard. There was another group eating at the site so it went fast and furious. I couldnt much talk much with hobie but every now and then my arm would brush up against her blazing hot exterior.

At one point, hobie was packed so solid we had to switch her on switch to off. Nothing worse than seeing a racing car at a red light. And hobies never used to being turned off. So saying that was a major bummer is a major understatement.

but as the steam rose and hobie caught her breath, she was at it again. Pounding dishes, forks and cups right and left....a whirling, vibrating mess of a machine

that means business.

Hot Damn i'm in love!

OK, ok, lets settle down here and get back to nature's Classroom observations....and i do have them. Ahh, yes today's major observation is that for all the cool facilities, dining hall, bridge and arch buildings in open fields, indoor sing-alongs etc...today i witnessed the actual teaching that comes from being in the woods.

I say this because though all the educational programs, science workshops etc that have their own labeled rubbermaid bins and accompanying materials to support that program...in the end there is nothing to compare with the raw power of setting off in the woods, alone...bare hands pushing over rocks, rotten stumps, flipping over leaves.

It was quite amazing. I got to witness three groups on a trail near the lake.

On Christina's group, the kids were primarily hunting for salamanders. With only buckets in hand - to moisten hands so that the salamanders stay alive (their skin is moist and must remain so, so a dry hand will affect the way they breathe) the kids were digging up the little buggers right and left. At last count it was something in the neighborhood of at least a dozen. A few of them got lucky and pulled up a big rock where the side profile of an ant community and its tunneling system were clearly evident.

On Olivia's trek, more salamander sprinkled with a few worms, a spider and a frog. I don't know what she told them but both girls and boys were fearless to pick up just about anything they found in the ground. maybe too fearless.

Jen everynow and then would yell Camouflage and the group would disperse into the woods while one chosen kid would count to 20 and when he or she opened eyes, any kid that could be seen was out. Boys and girls in unison attacked the woods with vengeance. Fear was their last thought.

Maybe i'm surprised since at that age - and in growing up in a big city - i was not the most fearless kid. I would step into a forest (ha! really no forest at all it would be years until i discovered the Everglades, so lets just say overgrown parking lots...) with trepidation.

Not these kids. What they are learning is that the green stuff is alive. there are critters and i expect that in the future when anything should threaten these areas... they will remember that they are a bit more than just trees. That below, salamanders slither, frogs hop and stones and logs and dirt turned over...opens up a new world of life that is teeming.

Even i, a veteran of the Appalachian Trail, was impressed. Even i was re-inspired to re-discover the woods. It has been years since i have been intimate with them. Maybe this is my return to their power and peace.

This is definitely the gist of Nature's Classroom.

Cesar Becerra
Greenfield, NH

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19 Sep 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Campers Arrive and my mind gets Spongey. Day1 at Natures Classroom

So with my fears settled with the knowledge that i wasnt late to my first day at work, i enjoyed a power bar and coffee for breakfast before meeting the group for the morning meeting just minutes before the campers would arrive near the main lodge.

As we "shot the shit" and got to know one another, Martin slayed a group of us with his new pimped out power watch which cost him a whopping dollar 50 at a nearby dollar store.

"Its as functional as it is hideous." He wasnt kidding. actually he had to sift through a pile of them taht actually didnt work. Its gotthis alligator looking skin, but in cheap plastic and a laughable g-shock proclamation tahtw e further enjoyed chuckling at since the shock of a butterfly landing on it would probably off set the correct time much les immersing it in water.

I'm digressing but it was a moment. Guess yu had to be there. But anyway, Martin that watch bud is G!

As the sun rose and began to cook us, Jenn and Christina were jamming to an Ipod left behind by a counselor who had to be sent home. Maybe thats too kind. i think he was fired.

From hilarious crowing of "anta Claus in Coming to Town" or a lively discussion about if oe song was a younger Elton John tune...these two are a total riot. If i were a TV producer i'd give them there own show.

They simply take goofyness to a new level of sophistication...plus their stage antics throughout the day were awe inspiring.

Jenn and Christina obviously have worked on a few skits developed for great laughs from campers and NC-ers alike. One would start in a serious tirade about the environment and the other would interrupt with some banal litany of diareah of the mouth...all of which to make a point of course.

The kids loved it. Somewhere i read in one of the manuals...that giving off a sense of having fun is key to winning over these kids. They are right.

The kids arrived in their air conditioned coaches after a 3 and a half hour ride from Cape Cod. First up was unloading their luggage and backpacks...some which weighed more than some small European Cars i've had the opportunity of picking up and moving myself.

The process is the first to build team building spirit as each piece of luggage is unloaded and passed on to each camper as it makes its way slowly under a shelter.

We then took all campers (there is about 70 of them) to an outdoor basketball court for introductions and began separating them in teams each assigned to a counselor.

By then it was noon and we settled in to the main dining hall to have the week's first meal. I was quick to fall into place in placing plates, forks, knives, glasses etc...ten to a table.

Each table is assigned a "Wai tron" who is in charge of bringing the meal to the table (in this first one it was pizza) and who will be in charge (in a rotating camper fashion) in future meals to come 15 minutes early and set up the tables

themselves.

Fun is everywhere. From cheers. To silly dancing and shouting...all to slowly allow for campers to crawl out of any shell of shyness they may be inside.

Some of course are naturally outgoing. Others - this week it is sixth graders - naturally are reserved to the point of thinking that any act of self expression is totally uncool! But little by little, they crack, and slowly they let their hair down...and by day one everybody is yelling, laughing and most important...learning.

Though they don't really feel like it's learning since they are having fun. Ahhh the key to camp. Any camp, is just that. Make it fun and they can't help but learn.

Throughout the day I shadowed several NC staffers as they led workshops and outings (Olivia's Wood Words writing class, Roy's "Float your Boat" boat building class, Martin's Arch building workshop and Erin's Hemp bracelet class).

Two classes in particular I found pretty interesting.

And remember I was "floating around" so I didn't catch them all...

One was Jen's "Grossology" class on the real science and practicality of weird bodily functions and squishy things (to name just two).

When I poked in, she was describing the details...or I should say, hyper details of all things "poop" related. Mincing no words, Jen employed words like "rectum" and "anus" as easily as she was belting out Elton John earlier in the day.

Christina's "Up on the Watershed" class taught the effects of pollution run-off in a way that allowed the kids to create an entire fictional but plausible town setting using rocks, play-doh and sand.

The topography would be sprinkled with dry jello mix, cocoa powder etc... to illustrate oil and pesticide runoff and how it gets into our water supply.

But my favorite part of the day was probably falling in love. It is not hard to do in a setting like this. But little did I know it would be in the kitchen, with a hot little momma named "Hobie".

Hobie, admittedly is a big gal. She gets a bit hot and steamy (I'm gonna refrain from elaborating on her dewey side - but let's just say "wet" in Hobie's case would be an understatement) and at times uncontrollable but who doesn't like a woman with grit and determination to handle anything you can throw at her.

Actually Hobie is the nickname for the dish washing contraption called "The Hobart", which is like a two ton stainless steel monstrosity that I got to feed dishes to during the dinner meal which really was a great way to end my day.

Alongside Martin and Erin, we must have fed that thing nearly 80 dishes, 200 some utensils, glasses, serving trays, sponges, ladles, you name it.

She's a beast I tell you.

No but seriously, the best thing about Hobie was the sense of me working alongside new friends and in a setting I have always dreamed of being in. Even the plate washing is fueled by our sweat and toil. And it got hot back there. But when it was all over, Erin and Martin and I were high fiving each other. It mattered little that we were a soppy mess.

It was at that moment I knew I was in the right place.

I'm at camp. We work this place.

I might eat all those words when i have to fend for myself come next week, but i think not. It is clear everyone here does it cuz they love it. God knows its not the money. Hell, i still dont know what i'm even getting paid. It doesnt much matter.

This is a dream fulfilled.

OK, enough with waxing poetic, i gotta get to sleep. Got me a big gal to dream about tonight. I cant help it. What sane guy wouldnt have his world rocked by a steaming hot machine like that!

Goodni ght.

Cesar Becerra
Greenfi eld, NH

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18 Sep 2006

mi ami florida, United States - Fire chats, false Starts and Lady Sovereign Reign along Otter Lake

After my hardy meal i settled into a 40 pound kayak and slipped into Otter Lake.

As i said the setting was serene, silent and well.... something out of a movie. I could just hear the director on the set saying.... "OK now cue the geese!" and sure enough a gaggle of them flew overhead.

I'm at the Barbara C. Harris Camp and Conference Center. Natures Classroom (or just plain NC) rents out the fascilities from the Episcopal Church who owns the property.

It consists of nearly 20 some buildings that abut along the boundaries of Greenfi eld State park in the shadows of the 2055 foot Crotched Mountain (north of Peterborough and East of Keene in Southern New Hampshire.... for those of yu mapquesters).

As i was floating Christina and Jenn started the bar-b-que with one of them old timey charcoal and lighter fluid fires that just took me back to "papi's" back yard grilling in the days previous to his messing with the propane tank and the lofty and odorless explosion of flames that cooks everything just so.

It hit me on the lake. Ahhhh. Somebody wake me up! I'm dreaming right. Later i mentioned to the group; OK guys/gals where are the hidden cameras, this is a joke right.... "yu all are actors and there is no such thing as NC?"

Laughter is contagious here and we had bunches of it by the fire after a trip into the woods to find the elusive phos-flourescent (forgive my spelling...i know its atrocious) larvae and some sort of moss seens a few nights before.

We found one little bug with it's butt aglow and a strange glowing halo we thought was a gift from the Glowing Gods. Unfortunately upon closer inspection it turned out to be an old toilet seat that had hit the right ray of moonlight.

Sunny commented that the right time for seeing the glow was during a humid or wet night. Todays intense sun dimmed the chances of finding what was in abundance a few days before.

Since we were in the woods we hauled back some firewood and started a fire thanks to the pyro-maniacle-talents of Erin who gave an improptu demonstration of just how flammable birch bark is by lighting several layers even after dipping it into Otter Lake.

She did the same at the old Chimney that now stands as the fire pit next to the

Aquatic Center... which also doubles as one of two cabins that the NC staff inhabit. A few minutes later a nice roaring fire was aglow as tales of dreams and outlooks on life volleyed back and forth as I got to know the group a little better.

It is clear we are all of the same tribe... whatever tribe it may be called. I have for years been trying to give a name to what is surely a movement of people who think radical thoughts on what is a life. Thoreau's "Life without Principle" essay kept floating in my head as key points matched the outlook of one or more members of the NC staff. We are definitely Thoreau-vian.

After I doused the fire I settled in (literally) into my bed upstairs in the building next to the aquatic center. With Lady Sovereign blasting on my cheap ass ten dollar portable CD player I caught up on some newspaper articles I've amassed but not been able to read over the course of nearly 3 months of day to day movements.

By settling in I mean really settling in. I awoke at 5am with a sinking feeling that I was... well SINKING. It turns out one leg of the bed was positioned on a piece of rug covering a hole in the floor for electrical wiring access.

Slowly thru the night the right side of the bed sunk, and it's no wonder it coincided with a dream I was having of climbing a steep mountain. But in it I kept slipping, making little headway.

So I found the problem and moved the bed on firm ground and slept on till 8am when I headed downstairs, took a shower and proceeded to go next door to check my e-mail.

Sinking feeling number two hit me when I entered the Aquatic Center and no one was there. I glanced at my watch and it said 8:40am. Crap. Did they say meet at the dining hall at 9:45 or 8:45?

I sprinted up the hill and raced into the dining hall, but it too was devoid of life. Hmm, now my heart was pounding. GREAT... first day on the job and I'm late and I don't even know now if they indeed said dining hall or some other building. I visited two other buildings and still no crew.

I finally found Sunny in the main reception area and he assured me I was one whole hour early. Whew! I gave him the results of my TB test and sauntered back to the cabin. Turns out the reason no one was there is that most folks were still waking up. Slowly one by one they came down the stairs.

Happy to see my new friends. I settled to check on my e-mail with calm and got great news. The first order of my Appalachian Trail Book on Amazon.com had come in from a guy in St Augustine!

Even if it's the only one I can die happy.

The day was to begin in a few minutes... and I'll tell that tale in the next installment.

Cesar Becerra
Greenfield, NH

17 Sep 2006

miami florida, United States - Greenfield, NH; I begin a new chapter of life at Natures Classroom

Sunny, who I have not met, took my phone call in jest as if someone was playing a prank on him. "Is this a joke." Nope.

I was calling to confirm my pick-up at Manchester Airport the very next day, my first as a new camp counselor for Charlestown, MA based Natures Classroom (see www.naturesclassroom.org)... a job I got hired for as I called from the middle of nowhere in a seedy motel on my worldwalk last April.

I had sent in an application and forgot about it. It certainly seemed like a dream job. Teach kids about the outdoors in a phenomenal setting (actually one of 11 amazing settings around the north east).

John Santos, the executive director had left a voice mail to call him at the office or at home. I did. A few questions later... actually before i was able to down a power bar as my feet soaked in hot water from pushing a 30 mile day across Illinois... came the words "your hired."

Huh? He wanted me to start soon, and on top of that "full time"... words i have not heard uttered in nearly 6 years! John never got the memo; "i dont do full time... not well anyway." So i agreed to either take a summer position or one in fall depending on my schedule... which is funny to me now, cuz really i make my schedule... a rarity in this modern time.

As summer approached, i had some last minute tours to conduct for EFT (see www.goeft.com) Tours plus i wanted to cross the Mississippi and do at least half of Missouri... which i have... so i took him up on a fall deal where i would come in, learn the program, see if i like it and if they like me.

I think i might be premature in saying this... but i think i'm gonna like this place.

But i must admit it was a bit of a hic up to hear that Sunny didnt know i was coming. But of course its a busy place, i understood and he said... "no problem, we'll pick u up" then added... "How old are you?"

I'll come back to that in a second.

My last night in Chattanooga with Bill and Becky was bitter sweet. I know i will be missing them badly. I know it will be a long while before i get back there. So i went out one last time dancing at my favorite hip hop/rock club "Cowboys" and one by one said bye to all the folks that know me so well there.

Its amazing that in a club in Chattanooga Tennessee where they blast "I'm bringing Sexy Back" along side "Pour Some Sugar on Meeeeeeaaay"... that one can make serious friends that look at you incredulous at the news that you will not see them for another 4 months.

Its sorta the end of an era really. And quite becoming that from one extreme of dancing with nothing but the clothes on my back... i would leave just an hour later at 4am having walked no less than 40 feet to the front door of Cowboys where Bill would drop my bags and myself off and i would begin a new chapter.

As my shuttle to the Nashville Airport pulled up. Long time bartender pals dressed in their tiny cowgirl outfits waved goodbye and wished me luck "out in the woods of New Hampshire."

Two worlds colliding and separating... all in a brief moment.

I slept nearly the entire two hour shuttle ride over to nashville AND on both flights from there to Baltimore and from Baltimore to Manchester. When i awoke... it dawned, the past was truly behind me. I was left with 3 heavy bags (how ironic that i give lectures on light weight living/hiking) and no knowledge as to how really was going to pick me up.

My first order of business as any true nomad would tell you was to procure (i.e. find one for free in the Manchester Airport long range parking area) a smart cart to haul all this to whatever vehicle or driver was hopefully being dispatched as i searched.

I found one. Rolled it in and as i was plopping my last bag. A cheery gal named Jenn cocked her head and asked "Are you Cesar?"

I felt instantly at ease. The calvary had indeed been dispatched and a few minutes later i was barreling down a highway that would soon loose homes and concrete to bigger and greener woods.

Jenn is one of about (i think) a half dozen counselors at Natures Classroom's massive Greenfield, NH camp located on a beautiful lake.

Conversation was easy. And really its clear that i'm in a sea of rebels and naturalists who subscribe to a new version of what a job is and should be.

Jenn studied to be a teacher. At first in the traditional sense. At a school. You know. A classroom with 4 walls. 35 minutes for (high salt) lunch. Recess with a kickball. Etc.

But somewhere along the way she got to teach at a nature/environmental program and she knew, she'd have to be in a different setting than chalk and standardized testing.

Jenn told me all about Natures Classroom, the characters i was to meet (i've met some) and the work they do there. Slowly i was beginning to understand that if you like kids and are enthusiastic, you'll be OK. So i think i will be OK.

She also explained the mystery question from Sunny about his curiosity about my age. I told him i was 33 but soon thereafter forgetting that just last week i had celebrated a birthday; number 34!

Turns out Sunny was excited to hear that i would be one of the older counselors and to boot... somehow he looked up that i was 5 foot three inches... so i was shorter as well. I'll get the full story of why this was intriguing... but Jenn and i had a good laugh over it since i was perplexed as to why he wanted to know.

When i arrived it was just about everything and more that i could imagine. Pristine Lake, Wood Cabins (on said lake) acres of lakeside beauty and total quiet with a generous sprinkling of woods.

Basically i'm in heaven. And my room overlooks a beautiful field and if i turn left i can even see the lake.

Cant ask for more.

Ahh... but there is more. More buddies. Next there was Martin who was born to hippie parents in Hawaii and Roy, who lives on old plantation era farmland less than a mile from the Mississippi in the state of Arkansas.

After unpacking, i met Christina, a fellow AT hiker who's life also has experienced a BAT/AAT (Before Appalachian Trail - After Appalachian Trail) scenario in that after hiking the trail in just 4 months... knew that she had to work and live (or both) in either Maine, New Hampshire or Vermont.

So here she is.

And here we are.

And here it goes.....so stay tuned. I'm off to walk round the lake... maybe part of it. Unless of course i bump into another fellow co-worker.

Whoops, i'm back, and gladly so... before i got to do my lap, Erin, yet another counselor arrived as well as Olivia. I dont know much about them yet so i'll fill you in as i do.

Roy and Martin took it upon themselves to train me in the fine arts of foraging for food... more like pillaging the fridge of fine foods like sword fish, cheeses,

salads and various sliced meats that makes me believe that it will be hard to ever go hungry here.

Martin piled it high with a heap of mash potatoes, chicken and mac and chesse! Roy added a phrase that i think really nails this place; "Its top shelf here...nuttin but top shelf...if yu go hungry its yur fault" I had to agree both on the nutrition front and food for the soul.

I piled my plate with salad, a hunk of cheese, chicken and that aforementioned sword fish and had a meal of it, then took off just before sunset on a kayak trip with a view of far off mountains, overhead flock of geese and water as still as glass.

It doesnt get any better than this...of course tomorrow the kids arrive and will undoubtedly impact the peace but then again they will add new sounds of ahhs and oohhs as many of them have never been exposed to the outdoors.

My training week begins then.

Stay tuned...

Cesar Becerra

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20 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Belly of the Beast; The Outdoor Industry Trade Show -A Review

Welcome to this series of my take on the massive (no i'm not exagerating) Outdoor Retailer Trade Show i attended a few weeks back.

I found myself in the "belly of the beast" if yu will of an industry that has grown as wild and raw as the most remote wilderness there is.

Of course, the wilderness is not so remote. And every year, the outdoor industry makes sure yu can access that wilderness with better tools, toys and gear to let yu to get even closer.

It was a great year to have been able to attend this key trade show as it celebrated its 25th anniversary.

Just how massive was this gathering. Well the numbers stacked up like this. There were 967 exhibitors from around the globe! But wait, how bout trying this one on for size. In total, 27,711 attendees from around the globe came to see the newest and latest or just some of the coolest/efficient outdoor gear made on the planet!

And they didnt just come to see it but also purchase it to stock their store shelves and take a gamble taht yu will want to purchase it in the next year.

So get this6,095 retailers came to buy. The orders this show (i'll call it OR for short) are astounding!

Lets just say its in the hundreds of millions!

As for me. Well iw as one of 461 media representatives there trying to capture the story or THE product. Or a series of products. But in theend we just came to get closer to the outdoors. Then again i wonder? Are we putting too mant gadget-y barriers between us and a fern. Between a glacier and a grin?

How much gear is too much?

Well at the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City where this massive trade

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show went down...i can tell you that this outdoor stuff took up nearly 175,000 square feet of space! Acres and acres of booths, gear, and the people hawking it.

So why is the industry so important? why should we care? Why do i care?

Well in an age where we are inundated with stress and time constraints and "simulated" escapes or artificial methods of unwinding from our busy lives.....the outdoors is in my opinion THE best way to unplug...to get back to your real self.....recharge the batteries.

And it is clear that we are doing so! Thank GOD. My proof is in the numbers of folks mobilized to make this happen.

A whopping 2.3 million people are employed as a direct result from people enjoying some sort of camping. 567,000 people are employed handling fun with snow sports. 587,000 for fishing. 1.1 million in the bike industry. That's right, just from peddling.

And in my particular sport. Well walking is mine but the closest i can gauge is the hiking industry....716,000 people are working to make sure you can traverse trail and mountain alike!

In a word; awe-inspiring! You almost had to be there to really understand how important this event was. But for those of you that weren't....here's my report;

Enjoy.

And remember to begin in chronological order you must begin as i approached and travelled to Salt Lake City on Aug 7th...or just read straight through from this blog posting to Aug 7th.

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake City, UT

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18 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Odd but Goodies; Misc. finds at OR 2006
I've written about my favorite in different categories (footwear, unique products, booths, etc)..but truthfully there was so much more at OR that is hard to categorize. So below you will find those products that i just could not shake from my mind.

Some i will never use. Others i must admit....i just haven't had the need yet to use them.

So here are the rest;

I don't know if i will want to bring out every extra ounce of hiking gear but if i was heading into cold weather and i cared deeply about treating my nose with tender loving care...i'd have to strap on the appropriately named "snot spot" (see www.snotspotvail.com)

This soft patch of cloth that attaches itself to your hand or around your glove allows the winter hiker or skier the ability to wipe off that extra nose mucus (i know, i know, this is not sexy, but a reality on the slopes or during winter) without turning your nose "Rudolph Red".

This is a great example of one simple product brought to market, under one quirky branded name that has slowly caught "traction" and made a steady income for the young couple that came up with it.

The name of the game at this trade show is to get your product on the radar of retailers that will stock the new product...or at least take a chance and stock the product at their store/outfitter and hopefully the product will sell and the orders will fill in for the next time.

In this vein I saw two competing companies trying to hawk the same type product; namely... a stand alone collapsible outdoor grill!

Enter the "stowaway campfire grill" (see www.newrivergrill.com), a grill that conveniently looks like no grill you have ever seen. In fact when you buy it the product comes in a one inch wide tube! Basically it's like the erector set of outdoor grills. You put it together and after you use it, it comes apart, collapses and you send it right back inside the little tube again.

Rob Osborne, the stowaway's creator from Bradley, WV has been hawking it for a few years and slowly has been seeing it take up precious space firmly in the camping aisle in small and large retailer stores.

But it has been a journey. "I had to learn all this as I went ahead. I had a great concept but how do I bring it to market?"

Tenacity and hard work are two things you'll need. But I don't have to tell Rob that.

Another company (I couldn't tell who was first or who is hot on the others' tracks/inroads) called www.grilliputusa.com makes another grill that is competing for the same (I have to chuckle) market.

Really. Bet you didn't know there would be competition in a revolutionary way we look at outdoor grilling...for the camping sector.

OK. Moving along, I had to say something about a company that makes portable and water impregnated white towels to add a sense of sheen and sophistication on your next camping trip.

Usually seen at 30,000 feet in first class on a flight, www.whitetowel.com, had individual rolled and compact towels at the ready for the camper to just rip open and enjoy!

Speaking of enjoying the outdoors. For those unable to really decompress. Let's say an accountant still crunching numbers at a state park on April 14th...I present the water powered calculator!

Yup. I'm serious, a company named Freeplay has made a calculator that actually runs on water. Angie Roberson explained it to me but I really got lost in the technicalities but you pour water in the spout on top and somehow this thing turns it into enough energy to power this thing.

I didn't have the heart to tell her there are more serious problems to consider if you are working on a calculator in the woods; namely...the ability to not be able to disconnect!

Now as far as camping gear is concerned...though I am pretty happy with my (altered radically) 20 dollar Kmart tent, I have to say I am really leaning towards a smaller more condensed tent, sometimes known as a Bivy.

Integral Designs impressed me with their "micro bivy" weighing in at just 18.5 ounces. Tserin Cheesmond showed me just how light and compact it was (see www.integraldesigns.com) by tossing me the tiny, pole-less bivy which really is more of an emergency shelter than a tent.

Perfect for me one day as I see the night time accommodations of my trip as "just the ability to make it through a night." In other words, luxury is far overrated when it comes to shelters. I used to hike with a closed cell foam pad...now I just look for

a soft area to plop my tent down.

The less you carry the more efficient you are. It's not always about weight but in doubling the use of everything you also cut down on the bulk and just plain quantity of stuff you have to deal with, open up, pack out etc...

In this realm I was really proud of Lisa Landay who came up with a system I once dreamed of putting together called the "slenting-pack". In my view of it, it was a sleeping bag, tent and backpack all in one. In other words all three components were designed together.

Lisa has come up with the PACK-WRAP-AND-GO (see www.packwrapandgo.com) a combination outdoor system that rolls all together then plops on your back. Imagine, no fishing for hard to find items in your backpack cuz all pockets lined the length of the system are clear and see through.

Unroll it and you access your stuff plus you unroll your sleeping bag. Stuff everything in, roll up and place on your back and you are good to go. All that's missing is the tent component.

Good going Lisa!

There was of course some of the eccentric at the show.

Luckyduck, (see www.luckyduck.com) makes a pointer that apparently can send a beam 5 miles, so you can point at stars or have yourself rescued. But the company doesn't have an answer for the expensive (I think it was 150 bucks) contraption's inability to pass through clouds or attract rescuers that might not be looking for a millimeter sized dot on a canyon wall.

Then there was the folks from Hat Tail (see www.hattail.com). Now I like this product's please don't get me wrong when I make my case. But here is something I saw over and over again. There were quite a few products that admittedly could have been fashioned or created at home.

In other words. Simple solutions that could very well be recreated using what is around your home. But guess what. Like hat tail...which is basically a zip cord that leaves the back side of the hat and clips on to your shirt or jacket...even though you can make it...YOU WONT. You will end up just buying it. Cuz heck, someone else already made it...so why bother.

I saw this again and again.

Another great example was a product called "digital hero" (see www.goprocamera.com) which is basically a camera strapped to your wrist. This is not rocket science ladies and gents. I can accomplish the same with duct tape...but the removal process would be painful and besides...There it is. SOMEONES ALREADY MADE IT. So go pro will sell lots. Hell I will even buy one. I'm not one for taking much video, but when I do, my mini DV is a pain to transport and use while on the go.

I that same vain, but with an outdoor gear OSCAR (ok there are none, but if I could hand one out, Alan Davis would get one) the Blue Ridge Chair (see www.blueridgechair.com) beats any other multi-lawn/beach/camp chair hands down.

Consider this the mother of all outdoor must haves. Especially if you like to take everything out into nature (including the KITCHEN SINK) but don't want to haul it in a million parcels or backpacks.

Basically Alan has designed a chair that doubles as a backpack (not new mind you) but that has imbedded within it lots of clever compartments that includes a section that acts like a cooler.

Good going you all. Keep them products coming.

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake City, UT

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17 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Girl Power; Women take the reigns of the Outdoor Industry!

There were many years that the outdoor industry just meant the men. A place for manliness to get out all that pent up energy or instinctive outdoor expression of communing with our inner beings.

Women for years were considered a trivial adornment. there to stand next to a triumphant husband, in petticoats and long dresses next to a wildebeast no longer breathing. Almost about to be hung on a wall!

Never holding the gun. Never on long seafaring voyages.

Maybe tramping in the White Mountains of New Hampshire after a long 6 hour journey up the steam power cog railway...and even then, they were bundled up in a warming hut halfway up as the tender took on more coal and water.

Even the most sublime of activities were considered unladylike. Take for instance the ride up the Washington Monument was considered at first too dangerous for women and children. The gentlemen "braved" the contraption (elevator) while the softer sex walked up 555 steps of stairs to the top.

Oh, yes how gentlemen like they were. Of course times have changed. And few generations of today see it odd that women partake in the outdoors.

But still. It is a world that borders on male domination. And so it was great to see exclusive new lines of outdoor wear and apparel...pushing and celebrating that women are just as much in love with attacking the outdoors as men are.

My favorite three at the show were;

www.dudegirl.com

Kimberly McElhinney, CEO, founder and self proclaimed "head wrangler" began the company based in Truckee, CA on the spirit of adventure began by her grandmother...one of the foremost all-around outdoors-women in the early part of the 20th century.

www.adventurebabe.com

Based out of St. Pete FLORIDA, adventure babe puts a fun twist on girls in the outdoors by placing a whimsical but passionate female character having all sorts of fun doing all sorts of activities. This was basically the "Life is Good" of girl positive branding.

www.outsidebaby.com

Though more based on baby power than girl power, the founding member is a gal named Lisa Vinciguerra who began the fun line of kids clothing with the notion of empowering young minds...namely...Lisa's own kids...who proudly donned the duds on the clever trade show booth rug surrounding their clothing line.

As a bonus edition on the girl theme, i want to give props to the Solomon Company who every year gives away a pile of money and gear to help support women's dream journeys (see www.solomonwomenwill.com). If you are a Dude Girl, Outside Baby or Adventure Babe with a great plan to tackle the outdoors dont forget to apply for next year's Solomon Dream Trip giveaway. You create the dream and if they think its bold

enough...be ready to take off.

Cesar Becerra,
Salt Lake City, UT

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16 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - "I Wish i Woul da thought of that!" Companies with ingenious gear.

I'm gonna fail miserably on this list. It is hell to whittle down some of the best items i saw on the floor of OR 2006. But ya gotta start somewhere...so in no particular order (and i am sure i will add to this list) ...here are some items that stuck out.

Ingenious products;

The folks at Yankz (see www.yankz.com) have got the whole lightweight thing figured out. Not to mention clever space and time saving products for the active person that does anything outside the home.

Owner Pierce "PJ" Page hooked me up with some lightweight and streamlined show laces that allow the shoe never to get tangled up in brush or branches but also make it easy to slip shoes on and off.

Basically its a bungy coard like shoe lace system that yu custom to yur shoe, snip the rest of the cord away and thanks to plastic fasteners...allow yu to tighten or loosen (without having to lace) shoes at yur will without the fuss. Think velcro fasteners for the new millennium but without the velcro. Lacing is so last century!

They also had an emergency contact wristband that looked smaller than a woman's dainty watch. Looked like one but housed a waterproof folded tyvek sliver of accordion paper that yu can write all pertinent info on in case yu get hurt and cannot communicate.

There was of course apparel of all kinds at the show.

Gosh was there apparel. Big companies like North Face and Mountain Hardware and others took up half football fields of space for apparel.

But some of the smaller ones got more of my attention especailly if they were able to present clothing that incorporated a bevy of space saving apparel that allowed a true light weight jedi like me to tip toe thru the tullips with less and less weight.

The mother of all inventions came with a company (that was surprize surprize! in a small/tiny booth) called "scottevest" (see www.scottevest.com) who produced a series of clothing (obviously they got their start with a vest) that incorporates not only pockets (thats old news, anyone can put pockets on a shirt, jacket etc) but that places it in such a balanced and engineered way as not to tug and pull u down.

They have taken into consideration, as Carter Hedberg of the company explained... "the way an object rests and tugs down inside a pocket...so we figured out how to engineer pockets so that when yur entire jacket, shirt or pants are filled, yu will not feel awkward or weighed down."

I agreed. My favorite was a jacket whos pockets were not zippered bu opened and closed with a system of magnets so as to easily (especially with gloves) open and close them no matter what conditions are around yu.

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I have on many occasions fussed with a zipper, only to have to stop hiking, take off gloves, drop pack, just to open the darn thing. And of course on many occasions since placing an object in a "mere mortal" pocket meant an awkward and uncomfortable feeling of hauling weight that is now digging into my leg, chest etc...i have decided to pack it in my main pack only to have learned that i need it every other 10 minutes!

So off goes the pack each time i need said object!

Thank the Lord for Scottevest!

Speaking of thank the Lord, let me introduce to you three other really cool space and time saving (not too mention weight saving) gizmos from another small company inside another small booth (remember small booths are the way to go at trade shows) called Sprigs.

At first it was not too evident what they were selling since i saw large photo enlargements of arms and ears on each of the products. But i soon realized, thanks to Dawn Chaskin, marketing Director of the company that Sprigs was going to change my life come winter time.

They have made a funny little ear warmer, not only light enough but without the annoying band i tested on another product that seemed to choke the hell out of my head. (see www.sprigsville.com)

Basically they are self sufficient ear gloves that stand on their own. Or cling on their own without wrapping your head in a traditional (Princess Leah like) ear muffs. Nor do i have to subject my entire face to a Balaclava, which i normally do that only ends up fogging my glasses.

I just slip the sprigs over my ears, pop them into place (there is a small wiring system that bends back to hold said springs onto your ears) and whala, ear muffs without the bulk, weight or wiring system of a traditional muff.

Speaking of traditions. The outdoor industry cannot exist without PACKS. It just ain't gonna happen. they are the epicenter of the entire industry in my book. Think about it. All these little gizmos you take out doors have got to be hauled in something. Enter packs! All over the place, the main constant, or main strain of DNA of the show was backpacks. Even specialized ones for kayaking.

Everybody had them.

Except few have taken a look. A serious look into how they really sit on our bodies. Basically the standard has been...two straps and a bag. Enter Ameribag and the true need for a pack that is healthy for your back.

Better yet, enter Margery Gaffin who had the real need after an accident that left her with major back surgery to come up with the "healthy back bag" (see www.ameribag.com).

Not only did she as the scottevest folks study the way things dropped off your body when hauling stuff, but Margery went a step further and tested how things fell, how muscles and back vertebrae worked, functioned and got stressed. All this with the help of back specialists, surgeons etc and a few years later the Ameribag Company was formed.

I tried one on, and i was prepared to be quite skeptical since i was not a fan of the companies main model of the sling pack (one strap that crosses diagonally across your chest) but i was astonished at how the weight of what i picked up, seemed to slip away when it rested on my shoulders.

part of the design also incorporates a bit of the Scottevest principles of pockets lined at certain sections of the pack and the users ability at being religious about

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stuffing the right type objects in the pouches that correspond (for example one of the day to day use packs have a place for a small umbrella...and it should be placed just there). The point is, if you do it right, this bag will save your back...and thus will relieve stress and thus you will effortlessly glide thru your day, a trail, up a mountain etc.

I applaud these companies for pushing the realms of normalcy in the outdoor world and giving us new opportunities to be free as we should be in the great outdoors.

Cesar A. Becerra
Salt Lake City

Cesar

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15 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Footwear

No world walk, trail hike or hell for that matter any outdoor activity is complete or doable without the right and durable as hell SOCKS...and SHOES of course... and there were no shortage of sock & shoe companies at OR 2006. Trust me this is the short list;

Aside from the previously mentioned Injinji "glove-like socks", I enjoyed the raw, tough and still made-in the USA quality of The "darn tough" sock company out of Vermont. Representative Lori Schwilling explains the hundreds more stitching quotient that Darn Tough socks have per square inch AND in stress places where other socks usually begin to unravel. I like the cool alteration of color and design of these "darn tough" socks too, (see www.darntough.com)

Lin Socks had to be my next favorite, due to their basic padding added to even their thinnest socks. I'm a fan of thick but I also like a thin sock too. A bit of both worlds (see www.xmission.com)

Teko socks gets the award for the most naturally organic socks. Can't beat a sock made out of biodegradable, Corn-based fibers...even though I still couldn't understand how they are made. Love the colors though...and I'm all for the environment (see www.tekosocks.com)

Once again Injinji glove like socks, remember from a posting a few days back. I did manage to wear them every day of the show and I'm telling you, I kept the sweating and moisture content down in my shoe...a BIG problem for me at times (see www.injinji.com)

Now in the shoe category the competition was fierce, these were primarily the biggest booths of the show. In fact the Merrill booth looked as if it was the mother ship that lands at the end of The Close Encounters of the 3rd Kind 70's flick. Man this booth was so big, the day I saw it going up that had 2 cranes just hanging the lighting system. A funny thing to me cuz most booths just use the existing lighting of the Salt Palace.

My favorite lightweight manufacturing company GoLite got into the footwear market as they joined forces with Timberland to create one of the lightest weight and breathable shoes I have ever slipped on.

That's saying a lot cuz generally I do not like to slip my shoes on and off at a trade show or for any show for that matter. For years I have been a New Balance guy since it is pretty hard to find a wide shoe in my size.

But it was GoLite www.golite.com, the company that allows me to just traverse lightly with my 12 ounce backpack (The Breeze) which I am fiercely loyal to of course since after all the very same one on my back is still the original one I donned and hauled on my Appalachian Trail Hike in 2001.

Good goin guys and gals. And loved the little luau yu all put on at the tail end of each day.

At yeat another hi tech booth i bumped into one of my first sponsors...well the 1st year shoe sponsor....Brooks....see www.brooksrunning.com who donated nearly a half dozen pairs of Brooks running shoes for the first 1000 miles of the walk.

Good to see yu all and all the new models are looking good. The colors are quite all over the rainbow. talk about customizati on. Gone are the days of just white tennis shoes.

Now in the arena of new thought to "old soles" i'd have to say the revolutionary design of MBT's "Physiologi cal" footwear (see www.mbt-info.com) is so out there i had to try them on.

Picture a shoe with a big high platform like them go-go dancers from the 60's. You know the ones, the ones that looked like they had an extra 3 inches of rubber tacked onto the bottom that just made them rise above it all.

OK, now take a high powered welders torch or a band saw, and carefully carve out a half oval on the bottom so that the shoe ends up like the bottom of a rocking chair.

Yup. Take one step forward...as i did and...nope...not flat ground but a rocking flawless movement (it takes a wee bit of time to get used to it) allows the body to go forward without a jarring thud of flat soles on pavement.

Jill Penn explained, , "its so radical yu have to really practice at first, since we were never taught to walk this way...but in reality this is the way our footwear should have been made from the begi nni ng."

By the end of the conference i found a booth taht had one of them fancy ole foot massagers. man that hit the spot. But as soon as i got up i knew it was gonna be hard to wean myself off that machine. i quickly sat back down and forgot about the many booths i never got to see.

Ahh well. There is always next year.

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake Ci ty UT

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14 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Booth, an Exhibit, a MONSTROSITY; What stuck out at OR2006

Now there were to be sure at least a few million dollar plus exhibits at OR 2006. I wont call them booths, cuz lets face it, when yu re create an old Vermont Barn (as did the Life is Good Apparel Company) with REAL barn hand hewn beams, that WEIGH the actual weight of an old barn beam.... its just gonna cost.

Folks like the North Face and Snow Peak and Coleman and several others brought out the big guns.... namely, independent exhibit design firms to build these monstrosities...but it is the small, simple booths whos designers come from "in house" where I'd like to focus on today's picks.

So without further adieu, the top three low cost, hand built and in house designed booths that in many cases were much more eye catching than that of the big boy booths are;

Hands down the cleverest product, company and exhibit concept that seamlessly melted

together was Kahtoola's "snow travel systems". Basically a both about snow crampons or the new revolution of how we attach, use and view your typical snow crampon.

Danny Giovale, the CEO and founder and lead designer (gosh I love when you get to meet the the top dog) found himself on a steep mountain in the Italian Alps, when his old world crampons failed him. He almost fell to his death. That was all the inspiration he needed to think about re designing what he'd put over his boots to keep him attached to the ground.

Danny and Kahtoola – the company he founded – (see www.kahtoola.com) has come up with a clever boot hat already has the steel crampons sticking out from within the shoe, thru the sole and ready to grasp ice, snow and rock. You put that over, I mean OVER your boot, or in other words you slip your boot into the kahtoola boot and whala.... nice, steady, stable effective crampons.

But the winning combination was their simple booth in the shape of a plane's fuselage since they after all have deemed their new product the "snow travel system"...they figured that's take you for a ride. So all the employees were dressed either as pilots or stewardesses. You were issued a boarding pass. Offered a martini or margarita and by the end could sit in a real honest to God seat from a real plane. Genius. The seats from a real plane were bought on E-bay, everything else was modified, but looked authentic. There was even Kahtoola "pins" or wings, just like in the days that Eastern Airlines would give kids plastic wings when they flew.

Great job! Effective booth. Small budget.

My next favorite was Crumpler. A United Kingdom based "cool bag" manufacturer that I first got an inkling that I needed to see there booth....when a red cut out of a fish dropped out of my daily program booklet a block away from the actual trade show.

This is part of what we'd like to call a coup in the trade show world since the "gimmick" was already drawing me to the booth, before I even stepped inside the Salt Palace or better yet, before I even knew about or for that matter HAD EVEN HEARD ABOUT a company named Crumpler.

Basically the gimmick in this case was simple. An odd colorful cutout drawing of a fish slipped out of the daily trade show magazine. In back it said the following;

"We is Crumpler, we is roaring, we is hopping, we is like kangaroos on hot frypans. No, we are not vegans, we are bagans. Our bags are animals. We put them in a pet shop where they roar all night until we feed them photo gear, travel gear, picnic gear, nappies, MP3 players, cells, water bottles, discs; all the stuff from the day-to-day jungle. We give it to our bags to eat. And they eat it."

That got my attention. Young. Hip. Ultra Quirky...so I read on...

"They are hungry animals. We like to set our bag animals free, too, because they're tough. They stalk through jungles with their straps, flaps, holders and buckles held high, looking for prey. But they can be soft, pet animals, too! They crawl up on your lap and lick your fingers. They have lots of special features and colours, perfect for camouflage and adventures in 21st century city and country jungles."

Country Jungles... I liked the sound of that one...I must admit, it takes a lot to lead me on, but by now I was hooked...perhaps the fish stood for me and the "hook" in the mouth of said fish was the clever writing. So I read on;

"We is Crumpler. Our bags are fierce, strong; they have animal intelligence. They are Kings of the Bag Kingdom. But they don't bite.Much."

Classic...and sure enough, I made a mental note, kept the fish and was going to be damned if I missed checking this booth out.

So here was my review of Crumpler's booth...written in Crumpler-Speak;

"Crumpler is WE. We the quirky, we the sometimes caged animals in the country jungles that want to be set free. We (are) like fish. We like to swim. Some's us like birds. Like to fly hi. We like different fish. Different birds. We is colorful. We is quirky. We like these things to match our scales, feathers and fur."

Ok enough of that, anyway the booth was classic crumpler (see their amazing website at www.crumpler.com.au) and don't forget the au after the dot...anyway in keeping with their animal theme, which their bags seem to scream out animal prints, stripes etc..

Crumpler's booth took the cake for being a mid to big size booth but with a low overhead on price while still maintaining the cool factor.

They basically created a bunch of cages out of cardboard boxes that looked like wooden crates you'd find in old travelling zoo/carnival like troupes. On each side so that you could see through the booth was a grill, prob from some line of bar-b-q grills. Inside of course, caged like the wild beasts they are...were the Crumpler Bags.

Amazing. Large. Inexpensive. Brash. Cool.

In a word...Crumpler! Congrats folks...love your attitude and bags.

Lastly, and perhaps the most direct communicative booth that instantly promoted exactly what the product the company produces actually WAS...would have to be a cool little hacky sack company (actually they make more than just hacky sacks...but hell they did such a good job, i'm calling them the hacky sack company) called Adventure Trading Inc.

see www.AdventureTrading.com

Josh Gerak figured the best way to get the word out that they customized just about any special logo (from football teams to long distance trails) on Hacky Sack balls was to put up an entire wall, or three (since their booth was 3 sided) made up of thousands of hacky sacks!

But how do you do that? Let's face it, these aren't LEGOs. Slowly but surely they placed a wall on one side of the inside of their octagonal store display dispenser. And slowly like bricks or puzzle pieces they put them all together. Each octagonal unit being one logos hacky sack cluster.

I had visited a booth nearby that also sold hacky sacks and it took me 5 minutes to decipher just what the hell they were selling. Once I turned the corner and saw this booth, there was no mystery. This company sells hacky sacks!

Good going guys!

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake City, UT

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12 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The best of the best of OR 2006; First up....FOODS
Though I hate to do this in a rapid fire way...I'm afraid that with about 900 plus companies...though this list might seem endless, this here is my final recommendations of the best, the most intriguing, different and cool items I found while strolling booth to booth at OR 2006;

Enjoy;

In the food category I will start with Alpine Aire Foods which I got to meet personally with its CEO Donald Gearing who led me on and allowed to taste test (and walk away with a sample) of the newest generation of self heating meals called "inferno" (see www.tyry.com) which is a simpler model of the self heating meals I hiked the Appalachian Trail with in 2001. basically instead of fidgeting with a box, styrofoam, salt water packets and magnesium (the chemical reaction of which, heats the pre made meal) the entire shabang is in one easy to pull and set in motion box. just pull the rip cord, wait 15 minutes and enjoy your meal!

In order to get more electrolytes in your system "nuun" has created a series of water tablets that give you that extra kick while your body is busy loosing them all in the heat or up a mountain. Representative Erin Oconnell was happy to have me sip one on the spot and send me home with a set (see www.nuun.com)

Now there were so many power bar companies at OR it seemed like the entire trade show was being powered on power bars. Everybody was on like power bar over dose. Turn a corner, "here have a power bar", slip into a booth "would ya like to try our new health bar?"...and so it went. It was like crack at this place. Dealers pushing power bars. By the end of it I had a zillion of them.

And I had fun tasting a whole new bevy of new bars I had never heard of. One of which was Probar (see www.theprobar.com). This new bar takes nutrition to whole new heights. Instead of baking or heavy processing, this bar is "blended" with only whole food ingredients that are not processed in any way. On top of that, all they use is organic. Organic nuts, berries etc. I could taste the fact that there were no chemical additives.

My favorite was "Whole Berry Blast" and "Nutty Banana Boom", it just seemed every other bar had some after taste or plasticity about them. Now some folks like that. My buddy Danielle in St Louis for example loves a bar that tastes like card board. But that's her. I want my Pro Bar!

Now normally I'm not one for gels. I don't know how many of you know about "gels" but basically it's a favorite of bikers who have to pack in some quick carbs and nutrition but in a concentrated form so as not to take on extra weight, not to mention space; they like to slip it into their hidden pockets in the rear of their cycling jerseys as was explained to me by my buddy Julie who loves to pound down the mountain in her mountain bike.

GU Energy Gel (see www.GUsports.com) had a bevy of new and cool flavors (boby has this niche field changed, I remember the old days when I tried them on the Appalachian Trail...there were like only two flavors, orange and like tangerine/orange) like "Espresso Love" and "Chocolate Outrage". Low on sugar (3g) and high on the carbs, you cant beat this 32g pack of energy in an easy to sip, squirt or gulp packet.

Another favorite "invention" in the food dept was a product called Java Juice (see www.javajuiextract.com), which is basically liquid concentrate coffee. We all have heard stories of folks going out into the outdoors lugging their favorite coffee kettle or thermos, well those days are over. This little 15ml packet is all you need. Just add 12 to 16 oz. (depending on how strong you want your coffee) of hot or cold water (hey the die hard light weight jedi's do not take on extra weight...I should know, I'm one of them!) and whala, a cup of joe, without the fuss.

This stuff was good. Really. I plopped some splenda and cream and I swear I couldn't make out the difference between it and a real fresh brewed cup of coffee.

Lastly (well keep in mind there were lots more, these are just my whittled down list of favorites) there was Cache Lake foods (see www.cachelake.com) that made really cool, really simple but compact dehydrated entrees and snacks that you simply add water to.

The greatest thing about this company is that you can tell they are not mass mass producing this stuff. I could tell that Bob and Billie Edwards are cooking this stuff in their very own kitchen. I love and very much believe their motto "Camping food so good, you'll want to eat it at home!"

And we are talking not your regular choices of just potato mash or well potato mash with bacon bits.... nope folks, this is the good gourmet foods like "Creamy Wild Rice and Asparagus Soup".... yup that mash "stuff" is yesterday's camping food.

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11 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Ambush at the OR Corral; I pause before a Flock of Seagulls

Enormous is once again not a word that even comes close to how big this trade show really is.

I am at a free computer station high above the exhibits watching the Life is Good (apparel company) folks throw nerf footballs across the center span of their humongous open aired barn!

And i'm exhausted. My feet are pulsing. Hold on, actually, let me take my shoes off.

Ahhh. Thats better.

I have been walking, strolling and stopping and shmoosing at about maybe 300 of the 925 booths here....and its taken me all day.

Problem isi havent even entered the main hall yet.

I have been besieged by a ton of free products, a million power bars and some special sponsorship offers that i simply cant refuse. So i'm humbled, grateful and really....overwhelmed.

SPECIAL NOTE TO ALL THOSE COMPANIES I PROMISED TO WRITE ABOUT.....I WILL WRITE ABOUT YOUR PRODUCT, only it will be a few days as i feel there is so much to say about the industry, show and quirky moments...that i will be doing a special write up on all the unique gear that i deemed totally cool....in the future.

SO STAY TUNED....YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

The truth is that i very much underestimated how many things i'd want to peruse, haul to my holding area in registration where my bag is now weighing in at over 50 pounds. And most importantly, i have been having fun playing in the booths, exhibits and meeying amazing people.

The day began at 5:30 when i took off and boarded a bus to The Marriot hotel Downtown where Smartwool had sponsored a lovely breakfast with all sorts of goodies to fill the belly before the big day.

The subject of the main key note speaker was fascinating. "Millennials"....defining this new generation that bears no resemblance to any previous generation. So the rules are different from the past.

I found this talk so engaging that i will be elaborating on it in a future story on my "bigger picture" essay blogsite soon. For now on with a day that would end by midnight and i'm currently (story-telling wize) only at 9am....which on the opening day of any trade show can mean one thing;

MOB SCENE!

The crowd outside the Salt Palace resembled a pack of Nirvana starved maniacs... only a tad bit older (though there are plenty of youth...do remember this is a trade show, manufacturers selling to retail shop owners) and all wearing TEVA like sandals (for the most part).

For them its Christmas morning. Mom and Dad have said yu can go downstairs and open the presents now. The outdoor industry picks today to showcase some of next year's new offerings...so for many this will be the very first time a new product is seen, tested and (for the gear heads) coveted.

One inside the Salt Center, traffic came to a halt. What was once (a few days ago) a runway of open carpet now was a sea of heads, bodies and swaying National Geographic Bags and rolling suitcases.

A key issue here is to stock up on all new catalogs, samples and pricelists; and to do so means logistical planning on just hauling off the massive amounts of ephemeral "collateral" that the companies spend millions collectively designing, printing and shipping.

My plan was simple. I staged my main bag at the registration desk's bag check in and i would venture off with my small bag to gather goodies and return, ala dump truck, and fill the big bag...and repeat throughout the day.

My first goal on day one was simply to just see all the small booths situated outside the massive 4 main rooms. The big boys with their big budgets have bigger booths that i can ge to on day two, but the small companies have a gazzilion little booths taht take quite a bit of time to peruse, inquire and enjoy.

Basically iw would approach booths taht i felt were accessible and had an interesting product. On a few occassions did i venture into booths i had little interest on the product itself...if and only if...i felt they had a great concept, booth presence and (i wont lie) free goodies.

Lets face it, with over 900 booths, the exhibitors know they have to break the ice and lead those buyers in.

Here is a run down on all the swag;

LOTS and LOTS of power bars. By afr the bug constant...in all shapes and sizes...and not strictly at the powerbar manufacturer booths but just about everywhere.

Walking several football fields takes energy, no matter how slow yu go. Talking takes energy. Hauling 20 pound bags do the same. Folks get hungry. Folks want munchies. Enter power bars.

Other trade shows of course have a high concentration of chocalate goodies, and thoght there was a smidgent of that, for the most part this is a "granola crunchy", earth friendly...organic type of crowd.

Easily i must have about a hundred bars now!

Next up; key chains in the form of caribiners (those rope rappelling, rock face climbing aluminum gismos that lots of the outdoor enthusiasts use even when they dont scale El Capitan in Yosemite.

I use them all the time on my backpack to attach wet clothes, my digital video camera, etc...

Usefull, needed and adored. A sure way to get folks into yur booth.

Then of course there were some great surprises; rubber band balls, tennis balls with company logo, even ice cream (that was made from a soccer ball looking product yu

can buy, kick around, get excercize).

Not only were there manufacturers of outdoor products but there were great opportunities i bumped into by simply being there. One guy i saw at breakfast, i would bump into later at a booth and strike up a conversation... turns out he's with NPR and liked my World Walk story and offered to walk with me one day and do a piece. A publisher i struck up a conversati on with, wants to review my Appalachian Trail book for consideration on possibly publishing it..

Another lady i met at the Industry Breakfast would like to host a fundraiser when i arrive in Columbia, MO on the world walk. Sock manufacturers gave me no less that 6 pairs to try out.

And so the day went...one booth at a time. Even if i had stayed two extra days i seriously doubt i would have made it through all the booths. The sacel is just too large.

So i cut my losses knowing that the main program and my on line registration has the contact info for the rest.

By 6pm i hi-tailed it to The DEpot for "OR LOVES THE 80's" party starring A Flock of Seagulls and their big 80's hit "I ran so far way". The evening was totally themed in 80's decor including a roller rink set up inside the old railroad depot with its massive walls and sunlight beaming thru its lovely stained glass windows.

Complimentary "I love the 80's " kits were distributed with old sunglasses (i.e. large ones), headbands and candy from the era. The food was roller rink chic starring pretzels and corn dogs. The DJ spun Prince, Bon Jovi and a littiny of embarassing 80's sounds, some of which i cringed knowing i onced jammed to.

Later that night i met up with some of the housemates at a concert in the middle of downtown and even later a stop at the bar Piper Down.

By the end of the evening it was 12:30am when i pulled in to the driveway (me being the designated driver) and crashed hard.

Exhausted and with way too much info in my noggin i would wake up 5 hours later and begin the entire process once again with day two at OR.

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake City

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10 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - SaltLake City; wonderful place to live, work and play! Just got back from a busy but also relaxing day in one of America's hottest cities both literally and figuratively. The heat was blazing as i walked the long city block so i just got out of a cold shower and am kickin back on Jesse's Laptop and with Em's (Emilys) CD grooving in the backround to the sounds of Niko Case.

Recharging my batteries today in preparation of a long ass day tomorrow for the real start of OR (outdoor retailer) 2006 conference and expo.

According to several magazines...i couldnt pick a more perfect city to take a day off and chill (though some might argue that my whole life is a day off). Outside Magazine named Salt Lake City (SLC) as the new "American Dream Town", its in their top 18 "perfect towns to live in".

Even the Sierra Club weighed in with a generous tip of the hat when they called SLC one of "America's Best New Developments" and Employment Review Magazine put it in its top 20 "Places to live and Work in America".

What better place to see that result than my daily commute with Julie who waxes on about all the great recreational opportunities that are just everywhere.

She drops me off just steps away from the TRAX light rail system that SLC has decided to rev up and increase spending and even its time table on shaving off a few years off the entire master plan. Usually they add years to that and many millions later, no one is using it. But everyone loves the TRAX line. Its beautiful, clean and takes up quite the center ring on SLC wide main streets in downtown.

I usually start at the main library downtown and low and behold - i'm not making this up, and no one is paying me - but it is apparently THE LIBRARY and just won a national award as the best designed library (with community programming in mind) by the National Library Association.

The place is beautiful, full of open areas and loads of glass. Glass everywhere, even the elevators. Think of the insides of a computer enlarged and floating sidewalks leading you to every nook and cranny of what you want. Its quite a sight. There is even daily architecture tours and the type of stores within its massive open aired courtyard all have themes. "Teach, Nurture," etc..

So i get my e-mail and my bearings there each day and today i mapquested several things i wanted to see that i just recently read about in the local papers.

First up The Phillips Gallery which represents regional artists. Travel Tip; wanna really sync up to what a community is all about go to a gallery that represents local artists. One of which i saw on the cover of the weekly "creative living" (i.e. alternative) newspaper called The Catalyst.

Her name is Kim Riley and she most definitely has an eye for the lens. Her photographs depict the surreal and mysterious aspects of civilization that is far removed from normal life. One of her favorite subjects and annual retreats is to the Burning Man 8 day desert festival where fire dancers, and shirtless (male and female) bicyclists and made-up communities made of cloth and steel pallette racks...all exist in a setting that gives new meaning to the term MAD MAX-like!

Turns out Kim was actually there on site so i got to meet the artist herself. I told her what i thought of her work and we chatted a bit about THE BURN (Burning Man) and why the hell i havent been out to it.

She's right. I came close one year but something came up. But realistically i have been waiting till i can actually WALK into Burning Man. That would be a rush.

Up next was a strange place across the street called Anthony's, a strange brew of antiques and collectibles encased in a giant turn of the century columned mansion.

Weird is only the tip of the iceberg to define this place. Each item was either so gaudy, big or cool as hell that i couldnt find "normal" pieces of anything. I had to strain and ask; "is this thing a lamp"... "is this a table"...but it was really a great diversion. I forgot for a while that i was living in 2006. I'm sure most everything inside was over a hundred years old.

Next i caught wind of a movie i have been wanting to see...actually a documentary called "Who killed the Electric Car" and what a more appropriate setting to see this film than here in ultra enviro SLC where a local movement called SLC Green is pushing a new style of modern environmentalism called e2 Citizen.

An e2 Citizen just doesnt moan and groan about problems, he/she attempts to do something about them. Their big thing is saving money on big projects that affect the city, combat climate change and ensure that economy and environmental impact find the right balance.

So it was that i felt inspired FINALLY to catch this doc. Each city i get to its either too small to house an indie film like that or i have just missed its run. But

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here it was, and here i was, and i hauled ass and walked several blocks into a massive environmentally sound re-use project that converted an old trolley center from the turn of the century into a shopping area. Bravo! Box stores they are not. It was a pleasure to walk in and take in the old bricks, long beams and large windows of an era that has passed.

The movie basically chronicles the odd fluke of how the big motor/auto manufacturers actually did a bit too well in developing electric cars prodded by a California law that stated that by 2002, the companies provide into California at least 2% of their line of cars to be non-emitting of any pollutants.

Enter the EV1 by General Motors that spawned a panic attack from within not only the auto manufacturers but the oil companies and even auto parts manufacturers... since these new cars were so efficient and maintenance free that they ended up being a threat to the entire industry.

What they (the manufacturers) failed to see was how much the demand for the vehicles pushed the scary reality that just MAYBE, the combustion engine has seen its better days... and was indeed the worse thing for the environment.

And so the melee began. The GM head honchos, careful to sell none of the vehicles (all of them were leased) began one by one taking them back. going as far as to (and this is the crux of the film) crushing and destroying them in a remote GM bone yard in the middle of the desert!

It was something else. I recommend everybody see this film. Better yet, walk, dont drive... and see this film.

After the film i had just enough time to hop again on TRAX and head to the University's Natural History Museum to check out "the greatest portraits of National Geographic's history."

What i noticed that was so soothing is that none of the photos except one, pictured an automobile. Ahhhh, it was soothing. Most of the shots were from the 20's... the world over.

What makes these images so timeless is the fact that all of the subjects wore nothing that looked mass marketed or manufactured.

I used to think it was the facial features of long ago and the glass plate negatives of old cameras, but i now see that what is different from today is just about everything is machine made.

Another sprint later had me catch the number 8 bus where before heading to my temporary home, i took advantage of a local haircutting place on the very corner where my bus drops me off... and i figured now was a good a time as any to cut back on the ole mane.

Half hour later, an upbeat and cool as hell gal named Jessica took off a half inch here and a half inch there and we chatted bout SLC, the worldwalk etc.. Loved her liberal use of the word "dude" sprinkled here and there.

Back at the Osage Compound where i caught up with Emily (chilling out and burning CD's to whittle down her CD collection), Oren (nursing his sun burn on half his body... the other half he proudly stated was protected by the free sunscreen i got him yesterday) and Julie (baking her award winning chocolate chip cookies).

SLC

9 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Outdoor Retail begins w/ Hummers, Gloved Socks & Chasing Tale Ale

Ahh American Commerce, the unstoppable runaway train. The good old American

ingenuity and capitalism is alive and well and on this day it was beached on the banks of a reservoir made to catch fresh water from the mountains BEFORE it would be ruined by slipping into the Salt Lake.

So basically its a man-made lake, the setting to feature man's best made products to deal with nature...both real nature and well, "simulated" nature.

In any case i'll get to my point later. First thing up today was registering at the Salt Palace as "working media" a process i began long ago by submitting my business card and blog sites to a PR company hired to check out the media that would be eyeballing all these new products!

I got in. And i was grateful. I'm not NPR or the BBC, which are...in the hiizie (house) here at the convention but hey i got my readers and i do lecture quite a bit to groups large and small.

So i got the "white badge" it blatantly says "WORKING MEDIA" ...a bit of a great ice breaker when approaching these companies cuz remember, they are here to sell things, get great "ink" (reviews) and as much promotion as possible.

So i'm in, and with my new badge came privileges like a great big air conditioned coach whisking me off to Willard Bay state park for the first "outdoor" version of OR (Outdoor Retailer) 2006.

It took nearly one hour to get out there! It was quite a ways away and i was so happy that my Osage homies hooked me up with a great place to stay cuz originally i was booked to camp way out here where the sun was brutal and the place pretty remote.

Once there i piled out and the goods...the FREE goods, began to flow into my once empty pack. Yup a big by product of these events is the "booty" or "swag" yu pick up along the way...enough for a humble showing under the tree at Christmas time.

There were hundreds of canoes, tents galore, a few sunglass manufacturers and a bevy of other folks on hand.

Below is a sampling of what i experienced and the stories that went along with each so yu know how these thigs operate.

My favorite were the guys at a funny little but ingenious company called Injinji. They manufacture a special type of sock. Just that one product. Socks. only these socks have little glove-like finger protrusions for every toe, so they are like glove socks (see www.injinji.com). Joaquin the CEO and Randuz the co-founder reminded me of a book i just read called the Mouse Driver Chronicles about a pair of Wharton graduates who go out to strike it on their own and manufacture just one product; a computer mouse shaped like the head of a golf club.

In the book they talk about all the ups and downs the risks and trials and the victories and setbacks in bringing this one product to market. I instantly liked Joaquin and Randuz and we hit it off well. They gave me some socks and i loved them. I have a problem with humidity and sweating and thus fungus issues when i walk. These socks keep the toes apart and catch all that moisture instead of letting it mingle with the other toes.

No playing footsie with these socks. I recommend them highly. I'll be pitching them at my upcoming talk in New Hampshire at the AMC.

Next up was a great little invention by a company called Wave Walker, which has figured out how to morph the worlds of cycling and kayaking and that of even sailing.

Simply put its a Kayak that moves on peddle power (the peddles, cycle-like move a propeller), with out paddles and it steers via a rudder you operate with a lever on

the left side of the Kayak (see www.wavewalker.us). I had a blast taking that one out for a spin and thought how great could this have been years ago when i was a canoe guide at several Florida State Parks where i was at a loss to deal with folks that just could not steer no matter how many lessons yu gave them. And say nothing of the fights couples would have when they were both in a canoe. I remember one lady so frustrated she thru her engagement ring in the water after getting back to shore and screaming to her now ex-fiance "if yu think i'm marrying yu, think again!"

Ouch! If they just had a Wave Walker, these two would probably still be married by now!

I got to even test drive a Hummer 3. You heard me. A real life, obscenely consumeristic tiny Hummer. And yu know what i had a blast. I know the enviro's here will have a fit but stay with me a spell.

Hummer knows full well what folks say about them. And they know the uphill battle they face with environmentalist. Especially those that know taht some folks use the Hummer for tearing up some serious off road areas and turning them into mush. Some of those areas are environmentally sensitive. Hummer teamed up with an organization called "Tread Lightly" whos motto is "leaving a good impression" and they are actively educating both new and old Hummer drivers and for that matter anybody with an off road vehicle to act responsibly....drive on man made trails....do not tread where yu shouldnt be, etc...

After a breath-a-lizer test (that some folks who drank the free give-a-way beer at the sart of the show called Chasing Tale Golden Ale...failed) with flying colors and signing away my life, i hopped inside an H3 and zoomed away with co-pilot Bart Jacobs who is a professional off roader who competes regularly at the U Roc Pro Nationals (this guy even flips vehicles on courses so steep it would make the course i was on today look like childs play (see fxrockracing.com)).

Bart talked me thru the course of big mounds of dirt, rocky boulders and railroad ties....and was impressed at how i handled the vehicle. He commented taht a few drivers earlier today even gave him the willies. And thats sayin alot.

I gotta say that is one interesting vehicle. After seeing what it can do offroad i was even more perplexed at how many Americans buy these things and take them no where near an off road course. Maybe jump a parking bumper or two at a Wall Mart parking lot, but who's gonna possibly wreck or scratch the paint on a 39,000 dollar vehicle just to say yu can tread dirt and rock?

Clear Blue Hawaii manufactures beautiful and tough Kayaks. One model is see thru and made of bullet proof polycarbonate plastic. It is like wearing a really expensive mask and being able to see under water (see www.clearbluehawaii.com). The company who makes Bic Pens, also makes Kayaks....who knew? (see bicsportkayaks.com) Another company manuaufactures waterproof (up to 10 feet) MP3 players (see freestyleaudio.com) and yet another company has come up with a great solution to truck camping. Say hello to Truck Bedzzz (see www.truckbedz.com) which is basicaly several customized air mattresses that have notches for where the wheel well is. A company called Pro Bar makes totally natural, non baked (just blended) power bars (see theprobar.com). And on and on.

By the end of the day i was exhausted, i rode the coach back to Salt Lake city wand was so comfy in my Injiji socks that my feet fell to sleep (as i took a long nap with my feet propped up) and i could barely walk out of the bus when i arrived back at the salt palace.

I hobbled to a nearby bus stop dragging now with several pounds of goodies and just caught the last 6:40 bus #8 back to the Osage Corrale and jammed on Jessies Laptop till mi dniht before i finally colapsed.

Cesar Becerra
Willard Bay State Park, UT

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9 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Crates, Paddle Tanks and Grip Folk build a city inside a Palace!

New friends piled in and out of the Osage residence that i've been crashing at. Most were either coming off or going back out to their wilderness jobs ...predominantly 8 day stints where they (Jenn, Emily etc) help re-build lives, self esteems of youth that have taken a wrong turn in life.

I'm getting more of the story soo so stay tuned but my day began refreshed and with a lovely smell of eggs cookin in the kitchen as Julie, Ben and Jessie began their day catching up with tales of new jobs, job seeking and who has or hasnt paid last months rent.

By 10 am i had finished my blog and Julie had taken a stab at her opening paragraph for an upcoming grant on what i'm gonna call the "liquid condom"...a gel placed inside the Vagina that acts as a protectorate against sperm or other fluids carrying HIV or other STD's.

She is stressed a bit (maybe bored as well) due to the fact that its an uphill battle with both "selling" this concept and a tiny wrestling match with her boss who just wants to cut and paste a grant together. But 5 million dollars is on the line and i take it that Julie does not like to half ass things. She is serious about this, and thus seriously worrying too much. In my humble opinion. I get it. But i'm not the one handing out the 5 million clams either.

So by 10 we were off. We drove to Julies lab at the BioPolymer Building at the University of Utah's medical center and went our separate ways. I had a train to catch and wanted to get a glimpse of the inner behind the scenes workings of the conference.

That part did not di ssapoint.

The aquestion is how do i set the tone for my readers for what i saw? Hmmm? Ok, how bout this; Imagine if yu will a willy wanka factory-like building so cavernous that "football-field-size" would not be enough to do justice of the monstrosity that is the inner volume of the massive Salt Palce Conventi on Center.

Its HUGE. And never ending. Two hours later, and mind yu i was simply just walking the aisles (not stopping booth to booth as i will be doing come Thursday), i was still walking around the place and got so lost i could NOT, i'm serious, could NOT find my way back out!

Booths are labelled 0453, etc... There are over 900 companies and many more entities vying for a piece of billions of dollars spent each year on the good ole outdoors. Time was, to go outdoors ...well...yu just went outdoors. But now there is a gizmo or a gadget (forget the main thing like a Kayak - they have those too) for everything. How about an adjustable seat back for said Kayak. How bout extra floaters yu can attach for sea voyages. Lightweight helmets with fancy lighting and reflectors. Special Suits with special pockets. And special watertight bags. Even water tight MP3 players so yu can jam to...Pearl Jam while yur navigating the mi ghty Col orado!

They've got it all. Right here. Under one roof.

The Outdoor Retailer Expo (and this is only the SUMMER edition...there is a WINTER one too) takes a virtual army, a unionized ARMY to boot...to build this outdoor city INSIDE.

The booths went from the simple to the absurd. And i'm only conjecturing now since not all of them were done. And they go from uber cheap (a table with a skirt...no

backing) to uber expensive (a re created lifiesize barn - complete with real old hand hewn barn wood beams and a beavy of Hollywood lighting skirting from above.

It is not unusual for some of the big name boys and girls (Coleman, Teva, Mountain Harware) to spend upwards of up to half a million dollars on their "presence" (at that moment a booth is simply not still just a booth, maybe a berth!) at the conference where they will be displaying to the nation's retailers their new line and new wares.

I stopped counting at 100, but seriously there were literally 100 plus fork lifts, beeping and spinning wheels and hauling this way and that all over the cacaphonous expo center.

Folks with walkie talkies everywhere. The place is so big there were war-like maps enlarged as if one part of the army would attack one side and the other the rest of the expectant parents...which is exactly what i felt is a good term for the multitude of exhibitors pacing nervously as there celophane and bubble wrapped and crated exhibits were delivered in place.

Many were not even opened yet. Others half opened making the mother of all environmental messes. A bevy of packing peanuts, styrofoam, tape and wood crates with screws and nails strewn about everywhere.

There was even a giant pool with hundreds of thousands of gallons of water right smack in the middle of the place for testing kayaks. The pool was obviously placed there first and days before i'm sure.

I overheard one company owner bitching about his placement "they've got us in the worst fucking place...we might as well be in Tuscon!"

And another bantering "oh yu wont believe it the brushed steel looks marvelous...and we are right next to the Marmot booth so i think we'll pick up traffic"

Outside the Palace i witnessed a sea of 18 wheelers being off loaded by another bank of fork lifts. One fork lift i witnessed had a donut box full of donuts hanging off the back. The driver single handedly munching on one and throwing another across the room to a fellow fork driver. There is no time for even a good long break. The opening day is two days away and the place looks like it needs two weeks to calm down. But something tells me i will be astonished when i walk in here on Thursday.

Tomorrow i'll talk about the second part of my day at the outdoor pre show i attended later that day. I'm exhausted and i've gotta get some sleep.

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake City, UT

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8 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Julie's Vagina Monologues and settling into Osage Orange Ave

Note; this series begins on previous post of Aug 7th

I found the tea pot. Well barely. Julie was right...it was very much "Picasso-like abstract." Hey i was just glad somebody knew where the Polymer building was because by then i had only managed to ask "Where is the Bio something building."

And this is after not really knowing which road to cross or turn on. Julie had said i walk back towards the tracks since it would be the end of the line, but as i began there was this big sign that said; "DO NOT WALK HERE!"

Great, i guess she meant the road...a pretty busy one and when i looked for the left

turn in the road as instructed, it seemed i got even more confused, but i put two and two together and flagged down a bicyclist (they know everything!) and he was able to pint me in the right direction.

It was great timing too cuz the two wheels on my one rollaway luggage - the very one hauling (precariously!...i'm a fiend at hauling several pieces on one well balanced roll-a-way) my other bags decided to invert themselves and stop working all together, so the last few feet i was tracking plastic and rubber down the sidewalk.

I guess this would be an advantage if i had to re trace my steps in this maze of buildings which by days end looked all the same to me.

So i found the room and peered in, said hello and heard Julie say "c'mon in".

Sitting at a corporate office looking series of half cubicles was my host, apparently lost in a sea of technical jargon as she conferred with her fellow co-workers/students as they tackled the continent of Africa's AIDS epidemic in a most interesting way.

Via "gel" inseminated Vagina cream-like medicine (run with this for a minute here, remember i had misplaced my pen, plus i was in half shock at the explicit jargon being tossed around like it was yesterday's sports scores) that will kill or hinder the spread of the HIV virus before it has a chance of holding firm to a new host.

Seems that (as i'd learn later) it is one thing to find a cure or a preventative potion for the spread of AIDS in a race against the clock fashion than to reverse the cultural habits of the male dominated black population in Africa that just refuse to wrap their willies with a condom.

I sat back sheepishly, face contorted as more squirmy words (to my ears at least) bantered back and forth between the three young ladies; "Semen dispersal", "optimum Vagina..." (something or ruther), "ejaculatory atmosphere" ...are but a few that i could retain.

Julie was a riot. It was funny to me, maybe i was just a tad bit sheltered on the sex-ed front...but i felt a bit like i had walked into a conversation my ears were not intended to hear. Almost to the point that i now understood the Beavis and Buttthead-like attitude of the giggle-snickler followed by an immature, pre-pubescent and audible "Huh, huh...dude...she said Vagina!"

I just had to laugh internally cuz i went from landing in the dry dessert to looking for abstract tea pots to "optimum Vagina consistency" (and basically saving the world-type research jargon)...all in the span of a few hours.

Welcome to my life. Its never boring...thats for sure. After her day ended, Julie and i finally and formerly met. She showed me her research in the hallway as oversize charts of floating A's and Z's and molecular web-like charts melted into a gaggle of scientific pudding that must have left a quizzical look on my face.

I really tried to keep up but i confessed to Julie that i was lost, but i got the concept. Plus by them i was beginning to hone in and enjoy her lovely incessant and passionate rambling from one subject to the next...not all sharing the same category either.

My kinda talk too, for my mind works a bit like this; i'll be thinking, reading and yapping from one subject to the next...all in my head of course since most of the time i'm just walking all day or travelling by bus all alone in my very own la-la land.

Julie is from western Colorado, the product of a Mormon upbringing. I profusely appologized for a quip i made earlier but she calmed me by adding that the Mormon doctrine never stuck to her. "As far as i know it was all in his head!" Julie added, referring to founder Joseph Smith's epiphany many moons back before leading a

contingent of followers from Naboo to Utah.

She was not shy about ribbing the Mormon-like stronghold that runs the city and region. Indeed, Salt Lake City is a place where you just never know who is devout and who is just visiting. On a few occasions Julie would make a statement but not before lowering her voice and mockingly looking right and left as if she was about to offend a church elder.

We loaded my bags into her trusty (meaning well worn - it just shows she's an outdoors type/adventurist gal) truck carefully making sure we'd not squash the Apple Pie sitting in the back of the cab...being cooked no doubt throughout the day...in the desert sun.

Julie wondered if the pie was still edible and proceeded right there and then to (unabashedly) finger what was left of the mess and decided all was still kosher in pie-land. So away it went, back in the cab as we spun off toward her home.

The pie incident reminded me I was with family. Sort of my Appalachian thru-hiker pals who drop whole sandwiches on the ground and without hesitation pick right up and continue eating without missing a beat. In other words, real people!

As we headed out, the weather changed in an instant and a wicked wind picked up as Julie and I were discussing a whole host of topics ranging from relationships to hiking to more Vagina monologuing! Just then as we noticed the power affected certain streetlights and more clouds rolling in, a quick and fierce gust swept the hat off my head.

MY FAVORITE HAT! The two dollar thrift store beauty I've been covering my noggin with for months now. Julie spun around to pick it back up and then said "I have an idea, lets go see this thing" and the next thing you know we were up on a hill overlooking the entire valley.

The sight was awesome. Biblical even. Like even sorta black plague like if Oliver Stone were around back then to have filmed it. The entire storm system blacked all of Salt Lake City while we teetered and balanced on a school parking lot curb and enjoyed the winds as we further discussed a cacophony of issues.

Julie is one of these souls that might not know it yet but is a member of "the tribe"...that restless population searching for a different way of living a life. Though she's in science now, it's clear by some other interests she's mentioned...she can go in any direction...guarding her options carefully and making sure she does not get boxed in by any one of a litany of societal pressures to conform.

Yup, part of the tribe. My people. Mi Hente.

We went shopping and I decided I'd cook up some Arroz con Pollo and did so at her comune-like home she shares with other quasi-nomads who switch rotation each week sharing beds and piling up dishes Julie wishes they'd wash. "I'm thinking of buying some bins and putting everybody's name on them"...so as to better divvy up responsibility for said dirty dishes.

I volunteered to wash them and did so, as I for the moment at least sunk into domestic life and fooled my mind into thinking this was home. But home is everywhere.

Tonight home is at Osage Orange Ave in Salt Lake with a bevy of guys and gals who just have no interest in doing dishes. They are busy living life. They are in between jobs, school, mountain treks and life.

Strewn about are the semblance of a nomadic culture. Cell phones. Mattress pads. Clothes drying on a line. Mountain bikes. Rapelling equipment and carabiners those aluminum things that folks climb up rocks with!

Life in flux? Or the flux of a new life?

Cesar Becerra
Salt Lake City, UT

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7 Aug 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The road calls; Worlds unfold each and every day. Day 1
Salt Lake

Like shifting lanes effortlessly in a Ferrari on the Autobahn, i shift worlds...or better yet...new worlds shift into my lane. I never know when to expect when my life takes a lovely turn.

Generally its when i bump into new people i have never met before. At this moment i'm in a comune like co-op of a home that changes residents quicker than the weather changes here (and believe me the weather can change quickly).

But before i get to that let me bring ya up to speed about how i got here, cuz honestly, it felt like i just woke up and poof...was all of a sudden here!

Nearly four nights straight of dancing at my favorite club (The Electric Cowboy) in Chattanooga left me both energized and spent.

Exhausted is a mild understatement or definition of how i felt when i boarded the Greyhound in Chattanooga bound for St. Louis to catch my flight out to Salt Lake.

There are naps, sleep and then there is clocking out. A blink of an eye later i was in Mt Vernon, IL awoken by the sound of the bus driver signaling a 1/2 hour break at Mc Donalds.

Right on the dot my great pal Christina was waiting and delivered the suit my mom had mailed for the conference and the upcoming two weddings i will attend later this summer.

Thanks Mom, thanks Christina!

I swirled back around, onto the bus and bam i was out again, though not before i perused a massive stack of magazines (mostly UTNE readers) that i downsized to just the articles i was interested in reading.

I must admit i still have a fetish for hauling around paper. I just cant seem to break myself of that habit. I cant even tell if its a good habit or not. I mean on the one hand i should be thankful that i have, still have a voracious appetite to devour knowledge. On the other hand i hoard millions of newspaper clippings...so that one day...well thats the rub, I DONT KNOW WHAT I'M GONNA DO WITH THEM?

In any case it helps the time go by, and sincerely i do like to read which is surprizing because before i began all this travelling i was not much of a reader.

An hour and a half later i saw the arch and my new journey west began with a brisk trek to catch the local bus to the light rail metro so i can kill a few hours at a stop i knew had a movie theatre. It was only 7 and my plane wouldnt leave till 5:30 the next morning. I saw no reason to squander money on a hotel room only to scramble at 3:30am to catch a flight, so after the movie (the underwhelming Woody Allen flick Scoop) i got back on the light rail system and ended up my 11pm at Lambert (ST Louis) International Airport.

As yu all know from previous posts, i love to spend the night at the airport. Once again i found in the parking garage a luggage cart for just the right price....FREE! I plopped my 3 bags on board and went off to explore every inch of Lambert Field Terminal.

One thing you have to know about St Louis is that everything it seems is designed to mimic the arch. The inside of the terminal is just that, arch upon arch upon arch...mimicing THE arch!

After a while it gets a bit neaseating and then of course there is the arch portrayed in logos. On taxis, coffee cups, billboards, dog grooming establishments! I dont know, after a while i think it just makes the arch less special less unique. Perhaps there ought to be a law or a moratorium on how the arch is used. But i guess you'd have a better chance in trying to stop grass from growing!

The airport was pretty quiet. You can tell that there are some airports that really should not be labelled "international"...i think St Louis is one of them. For one thing the place is tiny. I mean it looks as if its some regional mid west airfield. I crossed back and forth 3 times in like 5 minutes a piece. Miami's airport for instance will take you a good hour of sighseeing and mileage to get across.

I visited their post office at 3am after sleeping for a bit on a small area that had a rug.

I am comfortable sleeping anywhere and will do so gladly to not rush at 3am to get to the airport at 5. I just cant justify not only the money to get a hotel room for that amount of silly hours but its the rush that i most object to. Though my flight will take just 4 hours, i will be in the process of moving from point a to b will go for nearly 9 or 10 hours or more. I'm simply not in a rush and very much like to slow time down by reversing the rules on concepts like flight....which genuinely says, go by air and go quicker. I go by air and go even slower than the average traveller.

But you will never see me stressed out. Never see me in a long line. At 5am when folks are dealing with taxis and suitcases and checking out of hotels, or returning rental cars...i simply get up, brush my teeth and wheel my smart carte to the empty flight desk and walk away with my ticket. I check all baggage. I just dont even deal with the stress of potentially having to fret over stuffing a suitcase into an overhead bin at the last second.

OK, OK so back to my tirade on airport rug areas;

Miracles of miracles...i have noticed that there is a conspiracy to have any rug at all anymore at any airport. You have to hunt for it. Over the years i have even noticed, they have removed just about all of it.

Probably its a "we dont like you sleeping" thing that i bet they hide it to be as a "its easier to clean" thing. But none the less, i now know where the patch of rug at Lambert Field is at. Miami still has a bunch, especially a nice quiet place near the American Airlines Credit Union zone. In DC, at Reagan National i always head to the old section (which by the way is in my opinion the most beautiful art deco lounge) where there is still a swath about the size of a basketball court of rug to keep ya warm if your chillin out overnight. And the list goes on, but everytime i return to these places there is significantly less and less rug space for weary and stranded travellers.

Moving along...so i finally get to Salt Lake City where i was awakened by the plane touching down amidst a sea of harshly pointed mountains and a bit of desert. I had slept the whole way, but now i was refreshed and ready to tackle the day.

First order was to call up Julie who is but one of the seven residents in the couch surfing house originally welcomed by couchsurfer Nicky who appologized for not being able to be there since she was going to be out of town. At first i was nervous not knowing if her roommate Julie shared the couchsurfing spirit but i was put at ease weeks ago during our first conversation where Julie was more than helpful and excited to welcome me to her home.

After a chipper hello, Julie stated; "Take the bus in then the light rail then look

for a building on the medical campus behind and to the right of the health and science building called the bio polymer institute, walk in and take a left at the abstract tea pot painting and look for room 166"

My kingdom for a pen! I had none at my reach and so i had to just memorize the above. "bus, rail, medical, science, bio-polymer, tea pot, 166" OK, got it.

That and a prayer would get me there! I hoped. So i was off, the bus came pretty quick and soon the desert turned to a city, the city into green trees, then to my stop at the light rail in front of the library. I got my e-mail and before hopping on the light rail trolley i overheard a racket of noise coming from the courthouse steps...it was a live concert....a rock and roll one....but with miniature rock and rollers.

Hmmmm, an interesting gathering for sure. I wheeled my roll on suitcases and plopped down in the shade of a great big oak, and low and behold i came face to face with the touring version of "The School of Rock" a school that teaches young people the theatrics of real rock and roll performing.

Now i was finally off to meet and FIND Julie who literally held the keys to my home.

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7 Jul 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Human Cargo; One day of movement, 5 cars, one bus, 1 subway ride!

A bevy of folks helped me out today. From morning to evening lets see i hopped into like 4 or 5 cars, a Greyhound bus, a subway and even a Taxi.

And its still not over. In a few hours i head back to the Greyhound Station and begin my commute to work....this time in Orlando.

Ok, so with a morning emergency to take care of i brought it about myself to call a cab so that Becky could pick up her son Nathan who has just had RK (Eye) Surgery at work cuz his eye was acting up.

The Taxi Cab driver from Millennium Taxi showed up at 12 noon and low and behold, (Tom) was from Miami! Ha! who knew. We connected quickly and were soon swapping stories of traffic patterns, South Beach and Hurricanes.

I got dropped off at Amanda (new pal from my favorite dance Club Cowboys) and her dad's place in Harrison and she in turn took me the rest of the way to The Greyhound Station.

Then i boarded a bus. Got to Atlanta, hopped on the overground Subway (the Marta) and headed to the Candler Stop where my new assistant Lynn Cuminsky scooped me up in her trusty truck and we had a two hour meeting focusing on approaching Diabetes groups and organizing my library of images.

Lynn then took me to the Aurora Cafe, where a garage junk band trio hammered out some cool groovy music where i'd meet my trusty Couch Surf pal and now just amazing buddy Ori a...and we later headed back to her home where we'd switch vehicles yet again.

This time we'd hop into new pal Angela's (an art student from Valdosta, GA) SUV and head off for an interesting night to check out a real Cowboy/Tricker hangout called "Southern Comfort" where the ten gallon hats are taller than the pints of beer and about as tall as the lies told by some of the drunk patrons who as the band leader quipped "need to be bought their beers cuz they are cheap bastards and they cant afford shi t!"

On our way back to Ori a's where i'd spend the night, we took a last minute spin into the parking lot of Coco Loco's Mexican Bar and Dance Club....we approached the doors

cautiously but were scared away by the high cover price and hooker-like look of many of the male and female patrons...

It was a great night. Soon i head for Orlando. Lets see how that goes.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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28 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Last Day Out; Finishing 200 mile, 23 day section!
A nice ole 8 hours of sleep took me to a refreshed and easy 13 mile day...and the anticipation of getting another chunk of a time out/break to think how i'm gonna approach crossing Kansas made the day just fly.

It would also as i now see clearly would probably be my last day on The Katy Trail, and for that matter the end of my taste of The American Discovery Trail.

I just could not fathom dooing a loop-de-loop up to Columbia then back down to Sedalia MO when i can jus go straight to Sedalia...besides i miss the unpredictability of walking from town to town instead of on a flat, well manicured trail.

Call me silly but i'm just not a follower, i want to blaze a trail! My way.

So i got to Jefferson City by 12:30pm. It was exciting to see the dome of the state's capital for about 3 miles ahead of me.

I got to my last depot stop with a sentimental heavy heart and fofd memories for the trail i had now been on for atleast a hundred miles. Along the way (sorry i failed to mention...there is so much to talk about on this trail that i forget) there are at every major town and trail head these replicated little kiosk booth/sitting areas with info on the trail. You know, what's up ahead of yu depending on which way you are going. There are bathrooms and at times, small ads about which restaurants and lodgings serve the trail folks.

Well all these little stations are in the design of a small railroad depot since the old ones from 1897 are all long gone. Each actually say the town and the big comma with an MO (missouri)...most of the towns are small remnants of what they used to be.

I however still see the train chugging down the track and the kids and farmers alike scurrying to welcome long lost loved ones, get the local mail, ship out a parcel or recieve something from Sears and Roebuck!

The line is gone, the depots as well, but the state of missouri has put in these depots and thank God for that. The only thing chugging now are my feet and the few other hikers taht use the trail and of course the steel and iron horses with their steel wheels are now replaced with rubber tires as man power, not steam, now pushes people and goods along the Katy line.

I left the Jefferson City depot and began to haed into and across the river to embrace my next and long awaited break. A small farmers market and city walk festival complete with hay rides and community singers awaited me as i crossed over the mighty Missouri River probably for the last time.

Just a few weeks back i crossed the Mississippi and now this. I just can feel progress being made...the country slowly crossing below my feet.

It was touching and not without irony that i would choose to get back to civilization using the very form of transportation i had for weeks been walking on. I cJose to go home via train...on Amtrak...the line of course is on the other side

of the Missouri but from time to time i know i would be able to get a glimpse of the Katy or atleast i knew it was out there, across what now looked like a vast lake as the sun went down.

A kind volunteer named Joe who man's the ticketless counter at Amtrak's depot helped me order my ticket via credit card and over the phone. The rest would take place on board via a remote device the conductor has for taking tickets in the middle of areas that are so small in ridership they cant possibly place a full time ticket agent in town.

Joe let me know just how much times had changed. There was between Kansas City and St Louis (basically the entire state) absolutely no ticket agents due to low ridership. Yes, as the sun went down and we waited for the train, which at this time was late due to a delay waiting for a much more important shipment of cargo (than passengers)...i realized that one day too this line would be abandoned or sunk under the floodwaters of the Missouri as it did on the Katy line.

One day, the tracks would dissapear and there will be no trains, no old depots, no soul to connect with the past heritage of the opening of the west.

The sun shimmered the tracks illuminating them where all that was visible is the sillohette of the dome and golden ribbons of two tracks taht now got increasingly shaded and vibrant with the coming of my train.

I stepped on board and onto my next adventure. i would be back but rest and contemplation of 200 of my last miles awaited me as i chug along the tracks of my other life.

Cesar Becerra
Jefferson Ci ty, MO

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27 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - 18 hours of sleep, a Bar B Q, a new Card and a new me...walk on!

It was 1pm as i said when my head hit the pillow after a nice shower and man i was out. I mean out. Yesterday i had dragged on. In part because of the stopping to logistically handle the credit Card debacle. I also did not sleep well the night previously so it was so worth the 55 dollar B&B stay at Doug's - an avid bicycle maniac lover who also was the first B& B owner on the katy trail even before the trail was complete.

Doug was one of the first to see the bigger picture impact of such an amazing recreational opportunity. This was easier said than done. Sure every body loves it now but the transition from old deserted rail bed to bike/walking/hiking trail was a concept met with fright, fear and misconceptions...especailly by the farmers who initially thought that a pack of wild hippies would descend onto the trail and create gypsy camps taht would take over certainm areas...and that in turn would have some of tye following reprocuissions;

- a. they would pillage their fields of corn
- b. they would shoot their dogs or their cows
- c. they would be using and selling drugs
- d. they would be litter all over

well yu get the picture

"none of that happened of course" says Doug as he was grilling some chicken on his Bar BQ after i ahd awoken rested and refreshed at 6pm...nope, none of it, on the contrary, the folks taht use the trail take very good care of it."

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On the subject of litter, Doug let out an audible giggle; "Ha! Most of that trash you see at the trail head is from the locals, we bikers hate to bring out too much and we always pack it out, but when we do throw it out its not the junk food....most of those trash bins are soda pop bottles and hamburger wrappers....we just dont eat that way....these are health nut junkies we are talking about!"

After dinner, Doug lit a big bon fire where he was taking care of burning some of his trash and a big pile of old wooden palet racks. He spun tales of bike trips, restoration stories of the old farm house that is now his B&B, how the farmers embraced hem because of his hard work ethic and he gave me lots of tips about the next day!

By midnight i was ready for another long nap and did so. My head hit the pillow again and i was out. By 6 i awoke, went to the "little boys room" came back and slept again. I finally got up officialy at 10am.

All i had to do now is get my Credit Card delivered and i was good to go. 11am rolled on by and still no card, no UPS guy. I had some eggs that Doug prepared (sunny side up - remember i was at a bed and breakfast), 12 noon rolled by, no card.

Doug's Fed Ex arrived with the spokes of his tire he needed to replace the ones taht snapped the week before. While he fixed the bike he unveiled the plans for a future business taht will simplify his life even more. Bike trips taht are supported along a river or body of water with a floating hotel with the use of a 60 foot-some long classic wooden hull boat from the 30's.

Bikers would bike all day as Doug would follow wit the floating hotel and at night, their rooms and meals would be ready and the next morning they could just take off again, no need to even re pack all their gear. "Just ride"

At 12:30 i was getting nervous wether this card was going to show but then just then the UPS truck pulled up. I was never happier inseeing a brown van in my life! I got my card back, engaged it by using the 800 number and i was off. And none too soon, i had to do 20 miles today, so my feet were swift after all that rest.

So by 1pm i got back on the Katy trail. Each town was pretty small but enjoyabe to walk thru. The corn is getting big and almost ready to pick. I'm assuming the picking looks like it is coinciding with the summer's end county fairs i keep seeing advertized.

I crossed lots of old rusted out but renovated tressle bridges taht now support only bikes. they are quite a site though. I get giddy and nostalgic when i cross them, and although i am literally moving at a snail's pace compared to these locomotives of yesteryear, i put myself in that mode and i believe i am crossing the creek/river/stream as a locomotive.

It rained again today but my spirits were high since my day's end at a town called Tebbets would have me inside of a nice warm shelter i kept hearing about for miles. Inside as the stories bosted and sure enough by 9pm, i found...showers, bunk beds, a full kitchen, free bikes to peddle and....about 40 some kids from Missouri's Division of Youth Services (translation, at risk youth).

They were the best and i think i may have had a big positive impact on them as a great role model as many of them (15 to 17 year olds) asked for my autographs. They offered me steacks, hot dogs etc...., i decided to pack a great lunch for the next day since i already had my dinner two hours precviouly.

It was a heck of a day and after a shower i fell into a deep sleep.

Cesar Becerra
Tebbetts, MO

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26 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Credit Card Panic and the Universe tells me to Move on...

I remember a commercial years back that was from the Army that stated "we do more before 9am than you do all day!" Thanks make us feel lazy why dont cha! And i did feel lazy when i'd hear that, and yet now i have turned into just that. A buzy body who tackles more by 9am than most folks do all day.

June 26th is a great example of that.

For one i could not sleep. It got cold that night. Unbelievable too being taht it was HOT AS HELL during the day. I mean searing...and a few days ago i was in my underwear trying to get cool at night. Now i couldnt possibly stay warm, it was FREEZING.

Plus i had like 4 hours of sleep that day inbetween my town jaunts. So i decided to get up and get going. It was 4:15 and i got dressed, struck the tent and away i went. But first i dashed to the bathroom which had a heater so i can warm up a bit before pressing on. Yu looose a lot of heat handling cold tent poles...yu just do.

My first order of business was to get back to the ceter oftown and into the Amtrak station booth, which was also warm and next to the river and the bridge...it was there where i would wait the days first light so i can more safely cross the narrow Hermann bridge.

I did so by 5:15 but it was a quick trek across. This bridge was so narrow, when each car would come i just stopped and braced the sides making myself as skinny as possible. But it was over in 10 minutes and i was off towards the BP station at the corner where i was to resume my westwardly advance.

When i got to the BP i decided i'd but something for breakfast and some snacks to get me to the next town. But much to my horror i could not find my credit/ATM card!

It was now 5:45am and i had just entered a small vortex of a black hole that normally would have (years ago) swallowed me whole.

Now remember technically i was in the middle of nowhere, with just 3 dollars in my pocket, no credit card and no way to get out until i could get it back...but

i had no knowledge (yet) of how i lost it, didn't know yet if it had been stolen, and it was too early to call anybody in town to see if they had it

So i paced and thought. Bingo. Must have been the ditzy gal at Subway who was just spacing out. Had i given her my credit card and she had forgotten to give it back to me? Nope. There was the reciept...i paid cash. Huh? i was perplexed. Then i remembered the play and the ATM machine just before it. Aha. It was a type of ATM i was not used to. Normally i am around convenience stores where you swipe the card. on this, as at all banks, you send the card in. Then it spits it out later. but i'm not around these that much now. So i forgot to get my card back.

I wondered if anyone behind me had unscrupulously taken my card after me? I called my bank. Thank GOD they are on 24 hours. Wachovia said nope, no body had charged anything on it. So i put a block on the bank. The machine must still have it, but they wouldnt open for another 3 hours!

At about that time i remembered that Ken, the guy that along with Daisy the Riotweiller that had picked me up yesterday morning would come out on their daily walk. I called up Becky and we shot an e-mail out to loook for me. I also put Becky on high alert to find a nearby Western Union and to get ready to get some money out of my account via check.

I would decide to hike on, since i hated to loose valuable hiking time on a result that could have gone either way. I could have waited till 9 but what if the bank said someone took it.

Luckily i bumped into Ken bang on the dot at 7am, he agreed to logistically help me out whatever the consequences were. Later on if the bank found the card he said he'd pick me up from Rhineland and take me back to get the card. We walked together that morning and chatted for two miles before he turned around and went home. I went on and prayed all would be solved.

At Rhineland i just by luck stepped into the same type bank (different branch) that i had placed my card in. I walked in and explained what happened. A kind teller named Anita called up the bank in question back at Hermann and to my horror, actually to both our combined horrors, found out the ATM machine had chewed up and destroyed my card...as a company policy to thwart thieves...basically as a security measure.

Though kind and thoughtful as that might have sounded it now put me in a more precarious situation that i had no card to go back and pick up!

As dark as this seemed (especially because in the past my bank can only send a new card to my Miami address and it would take a week to get) for some reason i just did not see myself just stopping that day. Subconsciously i saw myself walking on. I just kept at it and kept rattling my brain to come up with a solution.

Another teller and i were talking options when i remembered i had one last check in my hand and therew as a Bed and Breakfast coming up in the next town. It happend taht she knew the owner and looked up a Doug Rendleman and we rang him. His voice mail was on but therew as a cell number listed. I called that and a surprized Doug Rendelman said this must be yur lucky day "my cell phone normally doesnt work, but it did and i'm just now pulling into the bank's parking lot, lets talk then."

By that time i had heard from the bank who informed me that they had changed their policy from the past and could now UPS next day a new credit card. Bingo. Problem solved on that front. And 5 minutes later Doug OK'd me giving him a personal check for the B&B stay plus we could have UPS deliver the card there!

Ha! I was off on my way. I headed out, all plans in place and five more miles down the road i hit the B&B at 1pm and crashed hard for a 5 hour nap since my day had begun at 4:15am!

Luck was on my side.

Cesar Becerra
Rhineland, MO

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25 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Trip to Herman...produces friends, rest, & a minor catastrophe!

As i said it was way to chilly to await the sun's warming rays. Besides they wouldnt come over the treetops till 7:30ish...and it was 5am, so i got up and struck the tent, shoved it in my pack, damp as it was and away i went.

The huffing and puffing got me warmed up. And in no time flat, by 7am i was at McKittrick, MO at yet another trail rest-side/way-side shelter studying my options. I could go either way. I could have gone on and get a head start on an already head start day or kill the day and rest up after my previous 22 mile trek.

I looked at the map of Herman at the kiosk and there seemed plenty to keep me busy, besides i had heard there was a pool, cheap camping, and more!

Yup, i was gonna kill a day. But first things first, i had to get across what i already heard thru the grapevine was a tiny narrow bridge. Oh well. Just as i put my pack on a small white cra approached the parking area with a big barking dog. It came out and lurcyed a bit, the mature fellow at the end of the leash reprimanded it and said "Now Rosie, thats no way to introduce yursel f!"

Meet Ken, my new buddy who in the next day or so would be a big help if even in a moral support/logistical way. Ken came out daily with Rosie, a big Rottweiller who really was a big puppy. She scared me none the less, so when he offered to take me over the bridge after his walk i quickly accepted then only later did i remember Rosie's fierce demeanor.

A half hour later they were back. I got in and Rosie started up again, only this time i was in the car and Rosie was a bit displeased. She actually looked as if she wanted to chew the back seat up. Eventually she chilled and away we went.

Hermann is a town started many moons ago by German immigrants tahtw anted to find an area of Missouri that looked and felt and operated like The Rhine River-Lands back in their mother country.

They found it and Hermann began to boom slowly and gradually until prohibition when unfortunately the boom went bust. They had transformed the entire area into wine country so they could not just up and hide hundreds of acres of wine wakin g like the "shiners" (moonshine) could.

Fast forward to today and Hermann is back, in a big way it has sold its soul to the wine devil and transformed the entire town's economy into a giant ongoing Octoberfest...whether its October or not. I dont know if they have it but they should definatly try this on for size as a great slogan; "Come to Herman, where everyday in October!"

So yes on just about every corner yu'll find either a beer garden brewery or a quaint bed and breakfast! Lots of them. Everybody's into the B&B game. Gotta house? Man, turn that thing into a B&B and poof, watch the money roll in.

There were a couple of othe factors that lead me to believe that this town had too much promise and curious happenings not to kill a day. For one, at the trail head i noticed that the town had quite a few historic sites. A plus for me. Two, inside a local convenience store plastered on the community board was notice that today would be the last day to see the locally produced community theatre musical Damn Yankees!

Never ever miss an opportunity to see local theatre performances. There is no better way to look into the eyes of the very locals yu are coming in contact with than having them perform for yu. Plus i'm a sucker for musical theatre.

Lastly there would be a free concert that evening at the town local ampi theatre.

So it was a no brainer. As a plus though i also found out from Ken that there was a local swimming pool (which i visited for 3 bucks) RIGHT NEXT TO the local city campground (who's pay system was a boz that yu place ten bucks in an envelope), whcih i could pitch a tent for just 10 bucks!

Again all of this was too good to pass up, so as i strolled through town the worldwalker in me gave in to the tourist in me. I got lost in the town's tiny streets, cute architecture and quirky mom and pop shops.

I pitched my tent, took a 2 hour nap and spent an hour at the pool cooling the HELL off! It was hotter than blazes. By 2pm i went to the Showboat Theatre. Or i should say, by 1:30 i was racing to get to the Showboat Theatre to catch the opening scene of Damn Yankees. But i had to buty the discount tickets at the chamber of commerce and i needed to pay in cash. So on my way i zipped by the local bank and got 20 bucks out. REMEMBER THIS, cuz this trip to this ATM would come back to haunt me.

But for now i was happily in my seat at the theatre and enjoying a great production of the story of Joe Boyd, a middle aged fan who sells his soul to the devil for a chance to lead his favorite baseball team to victory in the pennant race against the New York Yankees.

Helping the Devil, played by Jim Bucher who was quite devilish was a local high school drama student named Isabel Hohl which i felt stole the show. Isabel played Lola, the sultry vixen who attempts to seduce Joe Boyd (now turned into a young strapping 20 year old by the devil named Joe Hardy).

In what i think was the highlight of the show, Isabel as Lola sings the erotically charged "Whatever Lola Wants" (next line in song is "Lola gets!") and when she did so the audience froze, in part probably due to its explicit nature of its lyrics... maybe even too charged for community theatre. But also in part due to Isabel's innocent delivery as she has what i can only describe as a mix between Lost In Translation's Scarlett Johansen and a Sharon Stone-esque bravado that is utterly rivetting.

Course the bright red lipstick did not hurt either. In any case, she really was amazing. we should be seeing more one day of Isabel Hohl from Hermann, MO... mark my word, this girl is gonna hit it big.

Later i had dinner at Subway then took yet another nap before heading to the local Ampitheatre to hear The JB Eight (combo musicians) Jazz Band and "Eleanor" an amazing singer who played a host of classic songs from all eras.

As the sun went down, and the band played, i found myself lost in the world and pulse of Hermann, forgetting for a moment about the walk. As it should be and jst as i like it. I like to slip into and out of my differet worlds and sometimes forget one exists so that i may enjoy fully the fruits of another.

Cesar Becerra
Hermann, MO

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24 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - 22 miles and a light sleep, Dutzow to Mile Marker 96 I hit the trail by 11am and would not stop until 9pm that evening. I have been impressed just how far my feet can take me, even in the heat of the summer.

Actually there are alot of diversion on the trail called the KATY, and the other day i realized i entitled an entry with the cute term "Bunnies" and never really talked about them.

So... without further adew. Let me let yu in on a great pastime of mine. Watching fuzzy little animals. Bunnys in particular are my afvorite and they are on the Katy trail big time, especially in the morning and at dusk.

On this day in particular i had recieved an e-mail from my mom, wooried about bears or other animals. Nope mom, sorry just bunnies... and the occassional baby racoons (i've seen 2 now), snakes (2 harmless black racers) and a possum (a beautiful albino-like one i'd see a few days later).

But the big cats (the mountain lions) and bears (brown or black) have basically been absent. Folks tell me it would be a miracle if i saw one out here. And they are right.

A big treat today was meeting a cub scout group doing a 20 mile bike ride. At a trail shelter at Marthasville where comincidentalaly there was also a muddy tractor pull about to start... i bumped into a guy named Scott who was grilling hot dogs. But there were like a zillion of them so i asked him "was he the support staff for a

big group"...turned out he was.

Fifteen minutes later, some tired cub scouts drove in (they biked a bit but got tired) and devoured the dogs and turned the rest of their energy into questions for me.

I took some photos and was off. The hot dog eating crew waving behind me and yelling good luck!

Another treat that day was just a mile up the way at a place called Choo Choos, which serves frozen custard right along side the trail.

Their place of business is inside an old caboose. And their motto is priceless; "cool treats by the tracks" I had to have one. I felt guilty so it was good i put in another 9 hours of walking to work it off.

By sunset i was exhausted. put up the tent in a farm field and went right to sleep. But i was restless, in part because ironically it was freezing at night. I couldnt believe it. A few days ago i was practically naked in my tent to stay cool. And now, i was chilly. So by 5am i was up and attem and decided i'd do a short day of 5 miles and recharge in a little town called Hermann.

Cesar Becerra
Trel oar, MO

23 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Augusta to Washington, MO

My life is a series of fortunate but many times uncalculated safety nets.

That might be a loaded Ceasari sm but bear wi th me.

By that i mean that just about each time when i need some help taht will make my life absolutely effortless, it comes at me. Case in point with Charlie.

We met on the net. She liked my attitude, writing and basically invited me over, sight unseen....well of course my photo is on the net, but that is quite brazen.

One second i'm getting dumped with buckets of rain, wet shoes, cold wind and the next second i'm being invited to a home of a person i had never met before.

Not only that but the day after i overnighed and after volunteering to help Charlie grab a couch she wanted off of craigslist (where we originally met) i was dropped off on the trail with the luxury of no having to carry my heavy (well sorta heavy...10 pounds, i know, i know, i'm a whimp) pack for a day.

That's not only called "thank yu Charlie, thank yu very much!" but its also called "Slack Packing" one of the great joys in life. I would be dropped off in Augusta and 7 miles later be picked up in Dutzo.

With only one small issue to be ironed out. When we left her house to get the couch we had every intention of coming back to her place and dumping the couch off and getting my pack and filling it with just water bottles. I at the very least need my water bottles....its brutal out there....so since the couch turned out not to be what Charlie wanted and we were already out 10 bucks in gas we decided to just Kamikasi like drop me off in Augusta and i would fashion a backpack out of four plastic grocery store bags.

Easier said than done...but that was the plan. So i got my lunch, bought 3 bottles of water....ate the lunch in the city park and spend 15 minutes trying to replicate a backpack out of plastic.

The first thing i noticed was that the bottles were digging into my back. Plus they were hanging too low and hitting my ass. Not bad if yur getting a massage but i was

wal ki ng!

So i adjusted the bags, made more knots and took out a styrofoam lunch container out of the trash to cushion the bottles from my back.

Bi ngo!

It was not the most comfortable thing. But i was flyin down the trail and made the 7 mile section in like 2 and a half hours. So this was a short day. A luxury. But not a "zero" which i would have felt guilty about.

That night at Charlies, i taught little Love (Charlie's 4 year old) how to cook rice. Kids are sooo curious at that age. We had a blast. I later did laundry, we all watched a movie and i got some rest for my final send off the next day.

Cesar Becerra
Washington, MO

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22 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - First Steps on The Katy, Baby Bunnies, Racoons and a mess of rain

6:30 am i was up and attem. I got a great rest considering all i had was my tent. Bare body on the floor, my water bottles in the backpack pocket for my pillow.

Its amazing what i can do today. I remember a time where i did not dare camp or tent out unless i had the comfort of a walmart cot that i'd haul around in the station wagon and even then i'd opt most often for a hotel room.

But there it is. By 6:45, my tent was packed, i was dressed and a construction crew was looking at me funny as if to say; "where did that guy come out of?"

Such is the life of a nomad. Here one second, gone the next. And by 6:50am i was gone, i crossed the street and put my first foot on the Katy trail and actually sighed in relief. I was looking forward to this. Not only was i on the nations longest rails to trail bedway but i was also now on the nations newest long distance trail, The American Discovery Trail which runs from Delaware to San Francisco!

The day got hot with the quickness of lightning (which ironically would come later!) but luckily most of the early part of the day and most of these miles were shaded...a real blessing cuz today it was really really hot.

I had plenty of water but in reality had to be wize about it cuz there is few water sources with the exception of the towns along the way. I came close to running out but also luckily for me there are like a zillion people using the trail and an older fellow named Charlie who was biking it (which by the way seems to be the preferred way to enjoy and use The Katy) gave me his water bottle as he was almost finished with his early morning stroll.

About 6 miles in i bumped into two guys that were actually completing their bike trek across all 225 miles of the Katy. They got a kick out of knowing that i had indeed started my voyage in Key West. I surveyed their bikes and smiled, knowing full well one day i will do some huge bike trip myself. One bike had a bunch of gear on both sides of the back tire, the other was pulling a small baby riding trailer taht had been altered to haul gear. Hmmmm, my mind started racing with possibilities...but i soon got my wits about me and stared ahead thinking....."world walk first my friend!"

The Katy meanders along the Missouri River in many places exactly pointing out camps that Lewis and Clark stayed at in their traverse of the area in 1804. It was along the way at historical markers where i began to get really jazzed about the fact that i was now retracing some of the very steps and country that Lewis and Clark went

through. Too cool.

At about 11 miles or at 1pm i finally reached a town called Defiance which was rumored to have a "bridge" straight from the trail and into a bike shop that sold cold drinks.

Low and behold there it was and sure enough, i just had to have a diet Dr Pepper, not my favorite mind you but it was COLD and out on the trail it was hotter than hell.

I went straight to the post office and further ditched some weight sending my hitching bandana on, some mail, receipts etc.. I then called up my next host Charlie Pardiak who met me on an ad i posted on Craigslist. It would be hit or miss as i got an answering machine so i left a message that i was making excellent time despite the heat and i might be in Washington a day or two earlier.

No sooner did i hang up than did i then hear a strange noise that sounded like thunder. Sure enough, dark clouds were forming and the cool air was coming with it.

Yes i was celebrating it. I said audibly, "bring it on, bring it on!"

And it did, by 3pm the skies opened up, out came my poncho after deciding from the hollow halls of a gainat barn to just walk through it...besides its was actually cool and even chilly air now coming it. hard to imagine a few hours earlier it was boiling!

For about two hors i slodged thru the rain, happy as a pig in shit. One ranger at a county park asked if i was Ok. I said "why wouldnt i be?" She couldnt imagine someone voluntarily walking thru this. Obviously she had never met a long distance walker, nor a guy named Cesar A. Becerra who excells in the absurdity of extremes.

At a quaint little town called Augusta, i looked at my map, still wrapped in cellophane to protect it from the rain and i noticed taht by now, 7pm in the evening i had clocked no less tahn 23 miles! I was turning "diesel" again and just blowing thru the miles.

I checked my voice mail and this time Charlie had left a message taht she'd be happy to pick me up at the town. So i decided to do some blogging and wait till she arrived at 8pm.

One hour later i would meet charlie and her daorable little 4 year old Love (yes that's her name) and they would take the wet mop of a worldwalker to Washington, MO for a night to dry up.

Cesar Becerra,
Washington, MO

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21 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Leaving St. Louis; The Arch now gone..i step on The Katy Trail

Well my last morning at The Koppels was a lazy one. After my 13 mile, 9am to 8pm, slow crawl through the furnace of fire...i got some great sleep and worked on my blogs, packed and by 12 noon, gave one last hug to Sue (mom of the family) and i was off.

I meandered thru their neighborhood slowly as the heat of another day began to rize. What was cool is that one second i was in Suburbia, the next, thanks to a trail that Ralph set me up with, i found myself on the side of a wetlands marsh with a trail that hooked up with The Katy Trail, which soon for 225 miles would be my home for the next few weeks.

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Well on the map it looked wicked close to just jump over the Missouri River but in essence it took all day and i did not reach St Charles till about 4pm where i waited a bit in the shade of a pay phone (200 degrees in the shade by the way...well it felt that way!) checked my messages, called folks and by 4:55 i was ready to take a few hours off in the airconditioning comfort of the local theatre and listen to AL GORE yap about Global Warming in the buzzed about documentary "An Inconvenient TRuth"

By the way i loved the film and of course as i walked outside later i had to agree on a "man on the ground" witness that hell yeah the planet is getting hot. Then again no one is as crazy as i to carry on in the heat of the day on the tarmac of a roadway for miles on end.

Even i changed my tune and on this very day was gonna implement my new plan; Operation, get my ass out of the sun! So i finally by 8pm, hit THE Katy Trail, exhausted but excited to get a full nights rest so i can start up in the morning on the long railroad bed which (at least on pictures from the web) showed that most of it is at least partially shaded! Hmmm, we'll see.

I tented next to the local sewage plant, which many told me it would stink. It did not and i had a lovely campsite on a farmers field adjacent to it.

It took me forever to cool down. I stripped down to just my underwear. No blanket. No sleeping bag. None of that necessary unless i wanted to wake up in a pool of sweat by morning light. Yup its hot. The air was still. A faint breze wafted in now and then and i'd help it out with an envelope i kept fanning. My other hand wiped gobs of sweat every now and then just to stay dry. But it was no use.

I did however sleep. I was that tired. And by morning i was actually a bit nippy, which felt really good.

Cesar Becerra
Greens Bottom, St Charles, MO, KATY Trail

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20 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Long Hot Commute; Forest Park to Maryland Heights (the Koppels)

At 7am i got the wake up call from Ralph. "It's 7am" We were leaving at 7:15. It only take me but 5 minutes to get going. I always pack the night before and as i only have two pairs of shirts, two shorts, three underwear and 3 socks, well.....i'm easy on the fly!

Ralph introduced me on the way out to my route the next dayt which would take me through some urban neighborhood trails and through a park and across the Missouri River into St. Charles. I took mental notes and we were off onto the highway and for a first hand look at gridlock, St Louis style...which is to say, there was none. I found it pretty light traffic compared to Miami.

Ralph had this fancy sattelite system in his car that located and led us to the post office i wanted to go to and sure enough it was effortless. Its amazing what these devices can do.

By 8:30 i was inside the post office to get rid of some weight. As some of yu may know i'm still a sticky fingers collector. Not big stuff but paper and small objects taht i purchase for friends at Thrift Shops. I also was sending out thank yu letters and gifts for upcoming birthdays.

So i office on the road. Which means i get comfy and do what i have to do wherever. Which really just translates into the fact that i spread my crap out everywhere and make a mess for a while. Its amazing how such a tiny backpack can accumulate so much.

So after the post office i headed out and proceeded to re-enter Forest Park with its trails, bridges, ornate gazebos, lakes, and visitors.

The park is heavily used which is more than i can say for lots of other parks i have visited. St Louis seems to love their parks. There is just about one for every other block.

At the history museum near the park's edge i caught the travelling exhibit on the life of Ben Franklin...i also saw an exhibit on Charles Lindbergh and yet another on the 1904 World's fair. It was a delight to do so for no charge (the museum is free).

After loading up on some energy bars and filling up my bottles of water, i was off into the heat of the day.

First stop...based on Ralph Koppels recommendation the night before was "The Loop" a quirky neighborhood just next to University City in St LOuis where the main block has a great collection of eclectic and hip hippie stores, vinyl record shops, pierced (and tatoed) patrons and a sidewalk honoring famous St. Louis-ans.

I bought a croissant at The St Louis Bread Co and made a sandwich out of the sardines i had brought with me, both because i love sardines and because i was determined to drop some pack weight before i really take off west. Luckily this day i got to leave most of my pack weight home at the Koppels.

My trajectory was to walk to their place by about 8pm. I did so. It was a long 13 miles, but interspersed throughout was some stops to get out of the heat from time to time.

I had a glorious FULL day walking. Each time i'd look back the city became more of a memory and by days end i was in suburbia. And soon i'd be out in the country again...only this time on a long railrod bed called the Katy Trail.

Cesar Becerra
Maryland Heights, St Louis, MO

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19 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Forest Park and a Reunion with the Koppels
Its even bigger than central park...and in my opinion better layed out.

Forest Park goes way back...like the mid 1800's. Its beautiful grounds were the setting and location for the 1904 World's fair where St Louis was tranformed into Epcot Center, but on a scale that would tickle "the mouse!"

This day would be an easy one as i now had brought on about 5 or 6 pounds worth of food and tent and poles. I was not liking the extra weight so i only did about 5 miles to the Forest Park Metro Line where i once gain used the light rail to get me to The East Side of the St Louis Airport where daughter Julie picked me up to go shopping at Shnucks!

Shnucks is a grocery store here in town. I was cooking tonight. One of my specialties. Well my mom's specialties; Cuban Shrimp Creole.

This is good eating. Everybody loved it and it was good to be back at the Koppels.

Cesar Becerra
St Louis, MO

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18 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Back on the Walk; I arrive in St Louis once again. After a relaxing 3 day break in Mt Vernon, IL i got back to the walk... slowly... ever so slowly.

My reentry took place at The Greyhound Bus Station in Downtown St Louis where i had walked to a few days ago, so technically i was picking up where i left off.

Many times i actually do not go linearly across a geographic region. I slink around, wind up and down and around streets, inefficiently but happily checking things out.

Today it was the loft district.

I'm not even gonna waist my time re-hashing the issue that just about every major downtown in America it seems is alive and well and thriving with a new population of homeowners that NOW (after years in the suburbs) find it too cool to live downtown.

Once again there are the conversions of old buildings which i love, but also the new feux lofts that i think it silly and disengenuous to even call them lofts.

Glorified, high ceiling apartments is what they are.

So yeah, St Louis is doing the same. But with a twist. Instead of on a case by case basis. It seems that the city is really getting behind it. Pushing hard. Or it could be a consortium of developers, for i saw billboards and posters and organized block parties inviting one and all to check out downtown.

I walked thru some beautiful parks near city hall on Market Street and then into Union Station, which is a restoration miracle turned hotel, turned mega indorr mall. I had stayed there on my 50 state road trip, and its magestic lobby looked just as majestic as ever.

I later slinked through the Compton Heights area which is slowly being made ultra hip, one house at a time. It si clear that this could have been another East St Louis but Missouri has its act together and its programs to help out neighborhoods and families of lower economic status is far better.

It was a cool neighborhood, and i would get to stay in it thanks to Danielle Kallbrier, a couch surf host that lives in an apartment on Shenandoah with her boyfriend and cat Oliver!

The most curious cat in the world. What a funny creature. When i arrived Oliver spent several minutes sniffing my bag. he had done the same with my drop box of food and tent (i'm now taking on the tent to really camp soon) for a week!

Last week Ralph Koppel planted the seed about the Katy Trail and inside Danielle home was a book on the Trail. By nights end i had decided it was for me. She let me have an extra map she had and i'm now planning on hiking the 225 miles at least this section to Col umbia.

Danielle was a trip. The pierced, organic, neo-naturalist and part time model/full time knitter... yapped about a whole host of subjects. She is really into efficiency and has off the grid tendencies she is pursuing such as her current excitement about ordering a non-electric plunger type device that will wash her clothes for like 69 cents a load.

Later that night i met the magnanimous and hippie-fied/but with an alt-girl edge... Sarah... she of injured foot and Trey Anastasio fan club fame!

Sarah is a neighbor in the same building who had unfortunately ran up the stairs a bit to fast. Being that she is a waitress at Applebees, this foot thing, no going on a week and a half...has put a wrench in her ability to go to work...to say the least.

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But when it comes to going to a concert. Well, damn the torpedos (and the crutches), she's there. Particularly the night before where her idol (and heart throb...ok maybe more than just "heart" throb) Trey Anastasio (of Phish fame) was opening up for Tom Petty.

This girl was a fan. A true fan. I delighted in watching her enthusiastic play by play.

I crashed on the couch that night, just next to the air conditioner and was lulled to sleep by the hum, very much identically to when i was a child.

Cesar Becerra
St. Louis, MO

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14 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Crossing Over; Cesar walks under arch. cameras-a-rolling! Day 9

My wake up call came at 9 sharp. Sue came down stairs and woke me up. Alarm clocks dont work on me much. I just shut them off and go back to bed so when Sue asked if she should wake me i unabashedly said YES!

I ditched all the heavy stuff out of my bag and took just 3 bottles of water, a change of shirt and some maps and i popped upstairs to enjoy fresh fruit, eggs (Sunny side up) that i cooked and some coffee.

Sue and Julie and i chatted away with more travel talk and by 10am it was time to go. Julie headed to work and Sue and i hopped into the mini van and were off again to the airport.

I boarded the Metro and headed back to East St. Louis, got off and took the bus the rest of the way to the library i left off at the day before. The day was clear and sunny and hopefully perfect for my closeup!

Months before i had hired a new assistant from Atlanta named Lynn who is helping me with some computer related stuff and e-mail rebuilding and press releases. She had zapped and faxed some releases to St Louis and we had a bite with the Channel 11 news crew.

But with these things yu never know. Sometimes they flake out. A couple steps down the road i called Julie for an update. Well i tried to call her, the first pay phone was dead. As well was the second pay phone. OK by number three i got a dial tone.

"We're on. Two PM at the bridge." Beautiful. It was 12 noon by now so i had to hustle a wee bit but not before grabbing a bite to eat and a new disposable camera at Wallgreens so i can document this intriguing bombed out zone that is known as East St Louis.

Actually one thing i noticed as i walked thropugh there is taht this could possibly be the closest i'll ever come to mimicking what Cuba must look like based on both descriptions from a good and dear friend of mine and what i've seen in pictures.

It was almost like being on a movie set as entire buildings were in rubble. Windows blown out. Rusted bars on buildings that had been charred by fire and left in ruin.

In short, i walked thru yet another "world" as unbelievable as the prefectly idylic world of the corn fields but in a more civilization gone to hell sorta way.

I took shots of the buildings with their great architectural motifs. One building had some intricate tile work, another a great brass clock...as if someone froze the 1920's.

A few businesses were open buy most were closed. A discount beauty supply store. A wig shop. A barber shop...all eeking out a living.

I dont know what it says about me that i was so excited to see and be in the midst of all this. Maybe its because its more real than the suburban box store shopping areas where EVERYTHING is perfect, nothing out of place.

By 2pm i was in the parking lot of the Casino Queen awaiting the arrival of Channel 11's Jason Ronimous, who was the camera man who would interview me and take some shots of me walking across the Eads Bridge into St. Louis proper.

He was a cool guy who had just visited my hometown of mlami so we chatten bout that while he lugged a haevy tripod up stairs along with the heavy camera and i my packback.

We shimmied up the Metro Stop station that connected to the bridge and he rolled film. "Walk down this ramp. Circle round this bend. OK now walk with me. Now walk past the camera."

I'm sorta a pro at this and a few minutes later i was walking off across the mighty Mississippi River as a football field-sized barge brigade floated underneath the bridge with grain heading north pushed only by a small tug boat.

When across the other side, i smiled large and hung left to walk under the Arch and did so at exactly 3:05 in the PM on the 14th of June, 2006.

I'm in the center region of the country. No more South. No more sorta mid west. These are the center states of Missouri and Kansas and i'm glad to be at the 2000 mile mark. The world walk in some way has reached its maturity now and is rolling along.

After a few snap shots. One taken by a young lady reading a George Orwell Book (thank yu - sorry to have bothered yu but it was the best angle) i headed across to the new (and apparently 3rd) Busch Stadium and hopped on the Metro to once again head for the airport and the Koppels.

Sue picked me up and took me home to a wonderful flank steak, baked potato, creamed spinach and fresh veggie dipped meal. WOW. I was in heaven.

Later after watching the broadcast of me walking over the bridge on Channel 11, Ralph and Julie and Julie's friend (from band camp...lol...just kidding) Devon... all watched Euro Tour, a comedy about a bunch of teenagers who had just graduated high school and were experiencing the now new right of passage of travelling Europe with backpacks.

It was zany and hilarious. I laughed my ass off. But i was also thinking bout my passport which is just about to arrive in the mail. I too will be Euro tripping this winter. Dont know if i'll be experiencing the hi-jinks of the cast but who knows.

For now its Ameri Tour. By foot. Small pack. Light miles. New friends. New Experiences.

Cesar Becerra
St Louis, MO

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So the ending to my half way trek through East Saint Louis began with a bus trip to the local Light Rail station that is known as the Metro. For two bucks i'd be taken and whisked away to Lambert Airport to what seemed to me a million miles away.

I got my first ground eye view of the areas and neighborhoods i'd be walking through when i resume my walk next Monday. I always take mini breaks in between sections so after tomorrow i'll be taking a few days off.

I was heading to the airport not to catch a flight but to meet "Curly Girl" and couch surf den mother of a family i knew i'd be making great friends with way before i'd arrive to meet them in person.

As you have heard me say lots of times but not really explain the intricacies about...I'm a couch surfer. That is a member at Couchsurfing.com a group that allows travellers to match up with generous and open minded hosts (i.e. strangers till you meet) who open their homes to travellers or nomads like me.

Sound courageous. You bet.

Almost all the couch surf hosters have atleast one family member and friend who worries deeply about this act of insanity. "your gonna let a virtual stanger into your house! Whad-are-unuts!"

Well, i wouldnt call it nuts i call it open minded. There is a difference. Enter the latest openminded family of Sue (Curly Girl), husband Ralph, daughter Julie and son Jimmy. My dear readers its time to meet the Koppels...poster children and definitive great examples of Couch Surf Hosters worldwide.

I mean it. Number one, they love to travel. Sue caught the bug early on whether she liked it or not as an Army Brat who has lives all over the world. Daughter Julie has visited Europe recently and will be back in 2 weeks and just about each month has been travelling somewhere. And so on...

On their off time, they get to itch that travel bug by inviting folks over. Now i might be their second surfers ever but trust me its in their DNA, i can see a lifetime commitment to this. Actually years ago they hosted a foreign exchange student...so that counts too.

Anyway at about 7:30 i was picked up at the airport where i had just got off the Metro and Sue drove me back to their home and re-heated a great pasta dish with a heaping bit of salad. I loooooove salad. Anything green is king with me. And i ate it next to this amazing backyard pond/fountain/waterfall while i met son Jimmy (resident computer whiz), husband Ralph (also into computers as well as an entrepreneur) and later daughter Julie who just graduated high school and has the affliction of "Euro Trip" on the brain. I can just see her living there one day.

I had the downstairs (finished) basement complete with an oversized tub, internet and comfy inflatable mattress. Before i knew it the night whisked by after answering curiosities about life, travel, personal history.

My first day in St. Louis and my welcome party could not have been a better bunch.

Goodnight!

Cesar Becerra
St. Louis, MO

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13 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - East Saint Louis and the "danger zone". Friends caution me.

I had already recieved two e-mails and one phone call about East Saint Louis.

Similar missives have been sent my way as i walked in and out of Jacksonville, Macon, GA, Atlanta and Nashville.

"Oh boy, be carefull, that section of town can be really rough." a friend said of Macon's predominantly slum like area south of Union Station.

True, it looked like downtown Beirut, but what am i to do walk through suburbs the whole way across the country.

I know they mean well. And i guess i should be forewarned. But sometimes i think it taints my journey. Nothing ever happens. Not even a "lunge" or weary look. But i must admit when i enter these areas, my pace quickens...and i do not like to have my pace quicken.

East Saint Louis, IL is one of those places that even i was impressed how badly "burnt" out and "bombed" out it really was.

But before i get to that i will share with ya story i thought was tiny but timely and compelling and it had to do with the post mistress on the outskirts of East St Louis.

I forgot her name but she was black in a town obviously where you see very little of any other color. Not even hispanics. As far as the residents of East St Louis were concerned, i was out of place.

So this post office was in a non descript window-less building. On a side note i noticed a healthy amount of replacement glass businesses thriving. And yes there was a lot of glass on the ground. The sun the way it was made the streets shimmer with them, at least the sidewalks.

I'm digressing and babbling so back to the story. So this building had no windows. I guess to be honest this is a wise thing to do in East St Louis where broken windows seem to be in fashion.

Inside it was one of these postoffices that resembled more of a bank in a bad neighborhood than that of a post office. It had the thick plexiglass security windows and the larger double glass doored breezeway for bigger packages so that one side went open until the package is inside and the other door shut.

But when braced to ask to buy a roll of tape (since most stingy post offices...make that all of them...make you buy a roll) the lady looked at me with a smile. "Baby, there is a roll right behind you on that wall...." and then she added incredulously to my ears...."take all you want."

After picking my jaw off the ground and getting back in line and getting back to actually mailing the packages i commented to her how unique and kind tahtw as to lend me tape where other post offices look at you like you have just asked for their first born.

She then said;

"Well, i tell you what, they (the US post office) tell me all the time, do not lend out tape, sell ours, it makes us money (they are right that silly roll they sell costs like \$3.50 - highway robbery) ...but ya know i'm of the opinion taht if you treat people right, especially those that need it, then they'll treat you right."

I think she meant that East St Louis folk are look down upon, forgotten, ostracized....etc...

And i think she maybe right. Later in the day i heard from my guests that St. Louis really does have a bad racial inequality problem. Though East St Louis is in Illinois, it still seeps over the river.

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I felt that story was significant since i did feel the goodness emanate from the glass lined streets of East St Louis. I had no fear walking there. Yes, i'm a guy. Yes, i am not in a hot car or with fancy jewelry. Yes, something couyld have very well happened to me. But it doesnt excuse the issue that there are islands of ghettos in America, very much segregated, forgotten and dealt with with long arms instead of with up front care.

I dont know what the answer is but, at some point its gonna have to be solved WITH the help of "the other half".....i.e. white folk.

But thats complicated and hell i donmt even know where to begin, so i'll continue with my tour.

On one corner i had a great time enjoying the emanating hip hop bass beats of a car stereo and made two youth laugh with delight of my bouncing to the beat. "Hell yeah, yu know that's tight, go on with ya bad self" they said.

Crossing one devoid of life intersection a guy riding a bike rode next to me and said "whats up big man..." I told him my story , he nodded and rode away but added before he did take off "well you go boy."

Another lady gave me a toothless smile and held out her hand and i held out a quarter and gave it to her.

A small group of middle school students dribbling a basket ball waived at me as well asa group of built basketball sized "brothers" also gave a salute.

All positive, all cheery. Nowhere were there scowls, prowling or fear of any kind...but then again i am like MR. CAPTAIN OBLIVION...so yu never know with me.

At the East St Louis Library i decided to call it quits and head out by bus then light rail to meet with my couch surf hosts for the evening. Unfinished with the area, i looked forward to walking back through there the next day with a disposable camera to document this no mands land that intrigues me and others so much.

Cesar Becerra
East St. Louis, IL

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12 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Paradox of Choice; Why More is Less. The pull of options.

So my body really needed rest, but my mind was racing and telling my body "hold on just a few minutes while i put the laundry" then it can rest.

Yeah right.

Once laundry was in, i worried bout someone messing with it. No big deal mind yu. I have no Armani suits or anything with a designer label (except my Lucky Jeans "Rocker Shirt" but that's not like Prada or anything) but since i only have a few items of clothing, in a sense it would be a catastrophe.

So i figured while it was washing and before drying, i'd get some e-mails looked at and sent out. Well, you can just see where this is going. After that it was, "well let me wait for the clothes to dry. Back to the internet, more blogging.....body slowly shutting down....eyes growing heavy....when by now its 5pm!

Three hours just blown.

Its amazing while i'm walking, 3 hours go by at a snails pace and in town, time just evaporates.

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Well, laundry done. Blogs and e-mails finished. I crashed and slept hard till 9pm. The rest of the night was spent on the phone and watching TV till 5am as well as finally organizing and getting the contents of my pack ready for mailing out the next day.

I like to write, i like to mail, i like to pick things up and collect. Small things though. So my favorite thing to do is organize my pack and be ready to purge the next day of thoughts, items and snippets of paper that head out to all corners of the country.

I slept till 11 and asked for a 12 noon check out then hit it down Belleville's quaint main street which was chocked full of thrift stores. Its a wonder i got out of there in less than 2 hours. I could have stayed all day.

I think its the fascination of what somebody once owned and now yu will be able to have it for pennies on the dollar. Plus there is a "hunt" type journey to be had.

I love finding gems.

Away i went by 2pm with lots of ground to make up. Today i would see the arch and i was really looking forward to it.

Cesar Becerra
Belleville, IL

12 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The corn behind me, i walk into civilization; Time to do laundry!

So up and out i went, leaving the Scott Air Base behind me as the last rural miles of Southern Illinois corn-land slowly vanished.

One great way i knew i was finally ready for big city life was when out of the blue what looked like a railroad tressel bridge ahead of me turned out to be the St Louis commuter light rail train taht croosed the highway at the edge of a corn field.

It was time to leave vast stretches behind. At least for a while. After 7 days of sweating and living in my same clothes...it was also time to do laundry!

So after writing some blog entries at the local college library,, i turned my entire focus (and honing device) toward a landramat.

I got a few leads but everybody i talked to was a bit unclear as to where exactly it was. Normally i have atleast one item of clothing that is not so dirty and i'll change into that and wash the rest. But it was all a mess. A big stinky mess. Hey, this walk is romantic but its not always pretty.

Just about the time i felt i was coming close to it, i saw a thrift store and decided to take a gander to see if i could buy some cheap shorts, for like a quarter, so i could change into that while the rest got clean. Bingo. 75 cents did the trick as i purchsed some spandex shorts...perfect also for when it gets even hotter.

Laundry, Laundry...where are yu. I peeked down every street in downtown Belleville but to no avail and then suddenly the Motel 8 shot up as if it was a snake. Bam. Could it possibly have laundry. I went inside and then double Bam. There was a computer in lobby with free internet access.

I asked about laundry. The lady said yes. That was it, i hit the trifecta. A hotel to chill for the day, with laundry, and internet! Ha! The travel Gods were smiling.

It was 2pm and after two days sleeping on a couch i was ready for a nice long comfy nap on a real bed.

to be continued

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12 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Getting back to New Baden and an easy stroll under cloudy skies.

I was so beat by yesterday's heat that even Kelly was amazed that i had slept through one of the worst lightening storms he had ever witnessed.

"You mean yu didnt hear anything?"

Nope. But sure enough, outside the motel door, hell was still being raised with puddles all around and a constant drizzle. I was elated. Let it rain. Anything but that searing sun.

By the time i got ready it stopped and i was off. Called a Taxi and got shuttled back 11 miles for 24 bucks.

The day was quick and uneventful. Only thing to report was that is was downright cool. I'm talking maybe 60 degrees. Unbelievable, the day before i could fry an egg, today i was wishing for a light jacket.

Back at the motel, i saw that Kelly wasnt back yet so i went and played pool at the VFW. I confidently strode in as if i owned the place. Ate some free popcorn and later on when Kelly came in, he treated me to a small pizza.

Cesar Becerra
Scott Air Base, IL

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11 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Continued from original June 11th posting below
One of the friendly welcomers to VFW 4183 was J.C. Grantham, the post's "canteen manager" (i.e. dean of the bar's magic elixers). J.C. actually met me with a hardy "so yur the one."

For a minute there i though he thought i was NEO from the Matrix. But he followed it up with "the guy that is hiking...i read about cha!"

Indeed he did...in the Mt Vernon Register News a few days ago. Man that paper gets around.

JC and i chatted and later Kelly told me that he and his father Ken were both involved in the famed Freedom Flights, when after Vietnam had ended, POW were finally released and medi-vaced out of Vietnam.

Other folks were regular current soldiers. Some like my new pal Kelly were Civilian Contractors that worked a host of jobs supporting Scott's vital mission of the military's worldwide logistics.

You can send a great army to war but as Kelly explained if yu cant re supply them with "beans and bullets", they cant keep up a good effective fight. Enter Scott Airforce Base who's sole purpose is to monitor and supply the militaries world bases with all of the above mentioned and more.

Inside apparently as Kelly (who assists the General of the Base with special guest reception and logistics planning) explained are hi tech sorta "War Game" like wide screen monitor rooms staffed by dozens who oversee ship, air, train and truck movements of shipments of supplies all over the planet.

Later on in the evening JC and post member Joan Luna surprized me with an envelope

and a coin. The envelope was a cash contribution to my walk (mind you i just met them 1/2 hour ago, and an hour before that i arrived at a hotel with a NO VACANCY sign!) and a VFW post coin.

Now i have been given several keys to small cities by mayors and council men. But as Kelly explained later half in shock. "I've known JC for 35 years, i grew up here and i have seldom seen him give away a post coin, maybe once or twice to visiting generals, so consider yursel f pri vel edged."

I was.

Later that night i showered and slept like a baby on the couch after watching a fair share of TV.

Before nodding off i said a silent prayer thanking the lord above for watching out for me and bestowing me with far more than a coin but incredible new friends along the walk.

Cesar Becerra
Scott AirForce Base, IL

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11 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Great timing, Trail magic and a salute from The VFW Post #4183

So it was a loong hot tiring day. I was famished so i ate another sub at Subway. Hey i deserved it. Coming up soon was what i thought was my motel and boy was i ready for some R&R.

The place i saw on the internet said "The Outside Inn"...so no problem right sounds like a respectable place. Only when i arrived...the Outside Inn was no inn at all but a restaurant and bar!

Huh? I asked around but sure enough all said there was no motel in town so on the outset it looked as if i was screwed. New Baden is like the middle of nowhere. I consulted my map , took a deep breath and braced myself for an expensive taxi ride.

If only i was soo lucky. Turns out, New Baden is so tiny, there were no taxi companies in site operating in that area. I'd have to call them from far away. That would add mega bucks to what already was looking to be a great logistical nightmare.

For a second i thought. Hmmm, "shoul da brought that tent!" but another side of me said, there has to be an opportunity in this, a silver lining...well wait till ya hear how this one ends up...even i was blown away.

So i figured i'd hitch again to the next town where i knew there was a place. It would wreak havoc on tomorrows logistics cuz i'd have to back track, but what the hell. No less than 5 minutes with my new trusty "Equinox" professional hitch sign, i got a ride.

"William" and his boys drove a ratty ole pick up with a great big Gravelly Lawn Mower in the back, but hey they were willing and happy to drive me "to Alaska even" they joked. I hopped on board the back and strapped myself to this "thing" and when we sped away i quicky saw it best fit to take off my glasses and hat...both wanted to fly off my head...this of course would not be a good thing.

So passed me for miles on end stretched a blurry landscape of green corn, cool wind and a free ride. They dropped me off just a few blocks from Scott Air Force Base, which was my target for tomorrow's 10 miles and right in front of The Mid America Inn, knows in the old days as just the Scott Inn.

The timing could not have been more perfect, since outside was a friendly face

smoking a cigarette who said hello as i walked up to the office.

NO VACANCY!

My heart stopped in panic. Crap, what was i to do, now this place, a town that did have a motel, did not have room. Night was falling and my options growing smaller. "Shoulda brought the tent!" this of course is the downside of going thorough hiking.

The friendly guy approached. "Yeah, i think there full, but ya never know, that sign's been up for a while" I introduced myself and began to regurgitate my situation. He was intrigued with the fact i had walked from Key West or even from Mt Vernon.

"Tell ya what. My car broke down and i had no idea i was even gonna be here, and as this trip is getting stranger and stranger...there is an extra couch in the room, and besides yu look like a guy that is trustworthy, why dont cha stay here."

Amazing. Once again Trail Magic. I decided i'd help pay for the room as he was already lookin at a 2,000 dollar car bill. His name was Kelly Green and he had a lifelong connection to the air base, a place i'd soon come to know very well.

I dropped my bag off and headed out as he offered to introduce me to his friends at the Scott VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars)...hey i was staying in his place so i acquiesced, normally i feel funny walking into those places as they are for members only.

This one however proved to be open to all and friendly as hell. So friendly that in a matter of minutes just about everyone knew me. Kelly introduced me and what i was doing. One

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10 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Blaze! Crossing over to New Baden from Okawville.
Day 6

My palms gave me fair warning. As i filled my water bottles and ate my Subway sandwich. I noticed each time i'd face my palms toward the ground without a sandwich or drink in my hand, i could actually feel the heat off the pavement.

Much like yu do when yu are enjoying a campfire on a cold night.

BEASTLY! is what i keep telling whoever i talk to. "Today is Beastly"

It took about a 1/2 hour before i was already ready for my first big break. I found a patch of shade under a pine tree next to a corn field (yes an odd combination i agree) and proceeded to take a power nap as cars every now and then would zoom by. Yes, i have the ability to sleep anywhere and under any circumstance. I guess i'm lucky that way.

I was zapped of energy from the previous day. Note to self; no mixing of walking and dancing on same day! Though i have a strange feeling i'm gonna forget to adhere to that.

After my nap i drank another bottle, smeared more lip balm (remember i'm a lightweight nazi) sun block on my ears and face and arms and i was off.

The going was slow. Luckily my pack was feeling lighter since by now, day 6, i had eaten most of my heaviest energy bars...but still this heat was like hauling a ton of rocks uphill. My pace was crap. The miles seemed endless this day, but all in all, i never felt woozy or unable to grin and bear it.

I made a few stops that proved to be critical re-watering and cooling down moments. One was at this watering hole/biker bar called the Roadside Inn. It was dicey, and

after peaking inside, i decided to stay out. I found a hose around back and let her rip. But for nearly 5 minutes all that came out was piping, i mean PIPING hot water.

The sun of course had been baking that hose for 3 hours now so its no wonder i had to wait for a cooler temp to arrive,. When it did it dissapointed, the water ended upo just luke warm. I drank it anyhow. Filled up my water bottles, tanked up (a phrase we use in the hiking world that just means drink as much as yu possibly can on a warm day) and i was off.

Crossing a major river near New Memphis i noticed all the homes were on stilts. So was the road. Elevated for those times when i gues the river overflows its banks. But today there was no threat of that, these houses were floating in the air, the land below, dry and cracked as old unused make-up!

At another watering stop i made, i hit the jackpot since the water came out so cold, i nearly bathed in it. Really. I took off my glasses, wallet, and anything that could be ruined by water and just doused myself with cold water. Drank it too, right out of the hose. For a moment there i forgot there was a heatwave, but as soon as i tturned off the faucet, i realized i was just dreaming.

On both ocassions, though i was sopping wet, the heat only took just 20 minutes to make me bone dry again.

I would collect myself, take a deep breath, and slowly re-enter the sun from my wet and shaded oasis and press on again. Near the end of that day i got to witness one of the major farm machinery contraptions mowing down a field of wheat.

It looked like two semi's fused to gether with a big row of teeth and a mammoth old style lawnmover blades spinning happily across a golden carpet. It would cut about 2 feet of the wheat, leave 6 inches, and blow back the excess as if it was "afarting away" raw hay!

Somewhere in the middle of this "thing" was all the wheat kernells themselves. Two 18 wheelers were at the ready to haul off the stuff.

I am told these mammoth creatures can cost upwards of up to 300,000 dollars! Technology i believe has simul taneously made things easy and hard for the farmer.

Easier obviously since it takes far less time to harvest a field and harder cuz now the farmer has to nearly mortgage anything and everything just to have one of these vehicles. And this bad boy green machine is only one piece of many that make up a farmer's mechanized arsenal!

The day ended with a local baseball game at the park in New Baden as the sun was setting. A few kids were running through sprinklers and life was quiet in Southern Illinois.

I was prepared for a good rest. But the road had other surprizes in store

Cesar Becerra
New Baden, IL

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9 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Nasville to Okawville, IL Day 5, Prelude to "the blaze". So i reached the quaint town of Nashville, IL...a cute as a buttin type town with a great Main Street complete with sidewalk sales, old movie "house" (The State Theatre) and county court house.

All of which i was to take in...the next day.

For now i was famished and tired. So i looked around for a room. My first stop was

The Nashville Motel, but as i tend to want to check out all of the towns lodging offerings i went down the block to The Derrick Motel.

This place didnt even look like a motel as the store front had a Chinese Buffet and one of those tchotchkie stores selling like "Precious Moments" figurines.

But inside the old motel shone like a gem from another era. There were these great tiffany-like stained glass lamps that had the design of a derrick hitting oil. Too cool. Unfortunately the place was closed for the day, as the Chinese Buffet lady told me... "if yur not here by 5pm, they leave." Yup, this was small town lodging at its best. 24 hours is a misnomer here.

So i hobbled back to the Nashville and braced for the price. \$42 bucks. Well it was my only option and it was 6pm, so i figured thats a decent price. Though my real comfort zone is 25 to 35 bucks.

O plopped my stuff down and headed to the Kroger Grocery store where i found a pack of ham and cheese (both at a low sodium and calorie count and wolfed that up. I LOVE HAM AND CHEESE. And can eat it forever, but i do watch it and seldom ever get bread to go with it.

That night i showered and sat on the bed, blasting the air conditioner and enjoyed 3 and a half hours of the annual MTV Movie Awards. Which really is just another marketing vehicle to promote past and more importantly present movies.

C'mon, how can yu take seriously the "golden bucket" (as in popcorn) award for categories like "best kiss", "best fight scene", "best villan", "best hero"?

It was basically a bunch of movie clips strung together with appearances by stars who had every intention of promoting their next flick. Sometimes it is amazing the amount of money that goes into these shows, just, and only to....promote what posters,, commercials and hype do on a daily basis.

But i must admit, it was fun none-the-less. That is the part of me that is torn about my view of pop culture. On the one hand i abhor it, on the other, its lightwei ght-zany-cheezball-entertainment....that takes a few brain cells to watch.

In fact most of the night, i was simul taneously re packing my gear and yapping with friends.

I conked out by 3 am after some channel surfing and Blind Date episodes that proved to be about the very most "bottom bucket" of what reality Tv has brought us.

The next morning i headed out, refreshed and ready to go. The day was uneventful but i made some intriguing observati ons;

- A. Man there is alot of Corn in this state
- B. Man is it getting hot
- C. Man there is like no shade
- D. Man...at least the knee high corn gives off some shade

Yup, i found out that like one of those National geographic specials where the lizzard is standing on three feet (and lifting the one alternatively to keep it from frying on the hot ground).... that if yu just walk between the rows of corn, you can knock off maybe 5 degrees off the heat coming off the pavement.

Not much, but noticeable. Enough to make me keep off the pavement each time i saw a field of corn.

By day's end i reached Okawville (the W is silent), a charming little town with this old and very cool motel called the Original Springs motel. But before i got into town i chilled out near the highway and got me another Whopper with that discount coupon Burger King has me hooked on. Thank God for the burning of many more calories

than i take in, or these Whoppers would surely show around my waist.

Funny thing about hoofing it in the heat, is that when i do eat, my body is just devouring calories and i never feel full or bloated. A feeling that haunts me when i'm not walking.

After the meal and on my way out, the convenience store manager Cindy noticed me. "Hey, didnt i pass yu earlier today at that town"

I jogged my memory and did remember while cooling down outside an old general store in Addiesville, Cindy had indeed honked and waived. "I woulda offered yu a ride but my car was a mess" I chuckled and said, no worries, i've seen much messier cars and would have (if needed) jumped in anyhow. But i explained after she asked a followup question about how many people stop to help me that "if i had a quarter for every lift someone wants to give me, i'd be pretty well off!"

Its true. People are amazing. At least a few cars each day stop and ask if i'm OK and if i need a ride. I thank them but "no thank you" them and explain my journey.

In town i decided to push on to the next convenience store since i had some time to kill before my new friend Christina would pick me up to go dancing back at Mt. Vernon. If yu remember, Christina (originally the other day i misspelled her name with a K) was one of the 6-pack members of the "ten pack gals" i met at The Crossroads bar on Karaoke night.

Well Christina had offered to come get me so we can dance to some hip hop. That was sweet considering the distance. For me it was 2 days of travel, for her 20 minutes or 20 miles, but with the way gas is today, still its a jaunt.

That night i got to experience small town Hip Hop as opposed to big town "Electric Cowboy" (my favorite club in Chattanooga) hip hop.

"Hoochy's" was the name of the place. For those of yu not in the know or from a different generation, the term "hootchie" refers to um...how do i put it...a sorta "loose" woman. Common reference in some rap songs.

Mt Vernon is so small that obviously this wasnt an entire building dedicated to the club but a two time a week phenomenon that a local promoter puts on inside a ballroom at the local Holiday Inn.

But still;

- A. It had hip hop
- B. A dance floor
- C. And i had a pulse..... which meant

I WAS GONNA HAVE SOME FUN

And i sure did, from 11 to 2am i danced my ass off, quite surprizing in the sense taht this was after i had hiked for 12 miles that day.

The club had only about 30 souls at most that evening. There was a bar with Christina's friend "Winter" at the helm. It was her last weekend at Hootchy's so folks were constantly bidding their goodbyes.

The night was slow, as far as dance floor action went, but that didnt stop me. Much to the delight of the local black audience in attendance that night. I got rave reviews, some good laughs, a few "my dog! yu go boy!" comments...all of which were in reference to my ability to mimic their moves.

I have always torn it up when it comes to hip hop. "I'm feelin it baby" is my common rejoinder when folks compliment me.

Christina dropped me off the next day at the same place, only something was beating down on me in a much more intense way.

The next day would give new meaning to the term "heat wave"

Cesar Becerra
Mt. Vernon, IL

Cesar Becerra
Nashville, IL

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8 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Walk in the Sun, The Fields and a child of the corn.

Day 4

Beastly. Which is just how i like it. I dont know when i became a child of the sun. But i love to be roasted out there. Maybe its the months of winter and remembering what it felt like to have 10 layers on my body and now i have only two....but i love being in the heat.

Yes it got me in trouble last year. But i learned my lesson and i'm drinking much more water now.

In fact today i stopped by this old lady's home on the side of a farm. All was quiet. A beautiful garden and butterfly flowering plants were blooming and small wind chimes were a-ringin. I knocked on the door but no answer. so i walked over to the pump when at that moment a frail little thing of a human peared out her door.

I could barely make out what she was sayin but i quickly explained i was on a walk and in need of water. She ushered me over to the old style pump. Where i slowly lifted the handle and a minute later, cold, beautiful clear water sprang out. i looked back, she smiled, went back in side and i went on my way.

I began today checking out of the Royal Motel, my home for the last 3 days. Singh, the owner of Indian descent offered me yet another cup of coffee, but today i declined, wished him well, again thanked him for the discount and i was gone. My heavy box in toe.

I headed to the library, wrote my blog and bought the morning's paper. Who do ya think was on the cover of that little sucker? Yup. There i was, packing my bag and heading out. Gregory did a great job on the piece and it felt good to have gotten the story out.

<http://www.register-news.com/features>

I stashed a few copies in the box i sent to Becky and Bill's home and mailed it all off. I had lessened the load on my packweight as well. Now that i was going to take on the full weight and not slackpack as much (or boomerang back to the Royal Inn) i might as well keep it light, plus the "ten pack" gals did a "thumbs down on the beret i was wearing the night before (i do admit it is nothing like my favorite one) and the light rain jacket i carried was overkill. It was hotter than hell and if it rained i had my poncho, The jacket was too much.

After the post office i called my 4 dollar cab and hi tailed it to the highway exit 95, had lunch then hailed another cab and 17 bucks later i was back in Ashley by 1pm walking due west towards Nashville.

The day was a bit breezy and hot. I once again walked thru fields of corn and alfalfa, this time the corn was a bit taller so i'd gingerly let my hands fall down and i would let my arms touch the green tongue like leaves as i fairy-tailed it across many miles of green stalks, cool air and soft mushy ground that felt a hell of a lot better than the baking asphalt.

Halway across i saw a Derrick. An oil derrick that is. now i have seen them before but the last time i went up to one, a nearby landowner stopped his car so i didnt linger.

This time no one was around so i went in for a better look.

What odd, dinosaur looking devices these things are. They almost look like cartoonish machines come to life. Black oily goo covers the surface around it and the rickety engine put, puts while the fly wheel whizzes around.

I took a picture and was about o head back when i decided, why back track. I could rejoin the highway by just cutting across the field of wheat as i did with the corn.

Easy right. Well....in a way it is. But when it gets to be as tall as my waistline it gets a bit tricky. But it was beautiful. Again my arms would drop and i enjoyed petting the tops of this funny and surprizingly fragile and LOUD vegetation.

As soon as i stepped in, the highway sounds that are in my head just about all day were instantly drowned by the hollow reed like crashing of me walking through this stuff. My legs felt funny because this stuff is kinda sharp, liike a good, deep back scratch only on yur legs.

For 100 feet i slosed thru it as the mud was a bit soft. nothing like the view looked from a distant where wheat field look bone dry. the last thing yu really think of when yu see a wheat field is mud or water or even humidity. its almost a desert like looking plant.

I took off the tops of one and certainly know whay the phrase "separate the wheat from the shaf" is so appropriate. Its hard to get into that plat for the meat. Those little grains are really stuxck in there!

As soon as i popped out all seemed quiet again, and a few steps later the crashing sound of wheat was replaced by highway noise and highway quiet. In between long stretches of no cars whizzing by, yu forget yur even near civilization.

I reached Nashville and hit the library again toi write ya this. Now i'm off to search for a motel room.

See ya

Cesar Becerra
Nashville, IL

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8 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Second part of part 3, I walk out of Mt Vernon
So where was i.

Oh yes, so technically the Dick Jones story was really day 2. Day three began late. 11am to be exact. I am a lazy bum in a way when i walk. I mean the sun can kill ya out here and i do sleep like a baby, but it doesnt help that i Looove to watch TV. I mean looove to watch TV.

Its really the only time i get to do so. So i saw Big Love and the Supranos on HBO and a bunch of MTV. So it was 4am before i slept. My routine is to come in after a long day's walk like at 5pm, and sleep till 9, then shower then watch my marathon on TV.

So at 11am i was ready to go. Light pack in hand, i called the taxi company and for just 4 bucks i was taken to the Burger King accross the street from The Greyhound Station where i initially walked to the hotel from on day 1. Day two i back tracked

and filled in the southerly section. Now day three i was ready tow alk out of town.

But not before having lunch. Well...lets say...Burger King treated me. A few weeks before, while clubbing in downtown at Metropolis with my sister in Miami, Burger King was sponsoring the clubs hip hop room. They were handing out lots of stuff. Paper crowns, towels, t-shirts and cards. Debit Burger King Cards. I didnt get one but as i exited the club, there was one on the floor. I always pick up debit cards of all kinds. Once at an airport someone left behind a dunkin donuts one. Well that had 14 bucks on it.

It turned out the Burger King one had three on it. So i had a Jr Whopper and onion rings. I hadnt had a cheeseburger in maybe 6 months! It felt good. Reall good. But besides i was gonna walk it off through 13 miles.

Which i did. The day was beautiful. Lots of corn fields i crossed. With just small little corn stalks just getting started. Right near the highway it made for a soft and more peaceful walk than Hwy 15.

But there was some highway miles too, and while i was staring down from time to time, i'd see interesting stuff on the ground. Now normally i would not pick things up since i'm such a lightweight freak. Except Pennies of course, dimes and the occassional dollar. But today i could not resist and i decided to make a project out of it. So i picked up any odd 3-d item for a day and stuffed it in my backpack.

Lets see. There was;

a golf ball
concrete sack (empty of course)
a steel refector piece from the center lane
a plastic (and much lighter) one too
a small dead but beautiful shelled turtle
some animal bones
a car's silver name plate that spelled "lass" it was probably from a "cutlass"
supreme
a lighter

anyway it was interesting, i'm considering doing another exhibit for the stauth museum of kansas so i'm beginning to collect! Oh boy, here we go again.

By 5:30 i had reached Ashley and took out my trusty new hitching sign taht is silk screened onto a piece of cloth. one side says "hiker to town", the other "hiker to trail"

It worked. 20 minutes later two young country kids named Cory and Roger, who had just finished a days worth of fishing picked me up and drive me back to Mt Vernon, saving me 18 bucks. Thanks guys. I was torn on leaving them as there were 25 freshly caught Rock Bass fish in their cooler. Cory and Roger were going to feast. But i had other plans.

There had to be a nightlife in Mt Vernon, and i was gonna find it!

A shower and a meal later, i was at the library working at my blog. Then i hit the streets and found a little piece of honky heaven in the bar called "Crossroads"

Inside were no more than 4 souls plus the bartender, who was spooked enough last week by an undercover cop that later in the night she carded me for ID.

Ha!

That was flattering. I ordered a Kahlua easy on the rum. No worries, i'm no lush, i just like the creaminess of that drink plus its very light.

I have to admit, i'm getting more comfortable in my older age about drinking. I

still dont like it too much, but i'm slowly enjoyng certain light drinks.

Most of the night i was pegged as a "square" since when i'd order my diet coke, it would be brought to me in a styrofoam cup! NERD! I could just see others saying.

So as i said later i got my Kahlua in a glass!

Also inside was Dustin who does Karaoke every Wednesday there and behind me particularkly was a group of roudy gals i later learned call themselves the "ten pack" - u, er, for uh, the number of pairs each of them have. There are 5 gals so yu do the math as to what body part i'm talkin about!

Anyway, most of the night was dull with only the ocassional rock song. Most of it was country. But at 10pm Dusty finally played some hip hop and the place erupted. I danced my ass off as well much to the delight of the 6 pack (yes i know i said ten above but there were only three of them here this night) who loved my dancing style.

"Whereyu from boy? How did yu learn that?"

I was having fun.

One of the three, Kristina, told me i had to come back for Friday night when the real club that plays hip hop opens. Its called "hootchies" and we exchanged info to do so. So the ten pack will be picking me up 10 miles west of here tomorrow and bringing me back for some real clubbing.

Looking forward to it. But for now the road awaits. Today, 11 miles from Ashle to Nashville, IL

Cesar Becerra
Mt Vernon, IL

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7 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Dick Jones and Walking out of Mt Vernon, Day 3
So there i was inputting my daily blog when the eporter next to Gegory's desk asked if i had made the aquaintance of Dick Jones...MR DIABETES of Mt Vernon.

Well i hadn't but of course that would change in an instant. On he was there on the phone a second later and saying he'd be by in 15 minutes. In 5, he was there!

Dick is one of those "on it" Type A personality people who really tend to get things done. We shook hands but befoe letting go, Dick began a rapid fire of questions dealing with my diabetes story. I would later grow to love him enormously, but i'd be lying if i didnt say i was a bit uncomfortable at first.

There was a bite in his queries but i couldnt get at it. So where did ya start? How long has it taken? What was your sugar levels this morning? How bout last night? Wow. I had no idea who i was gonna be getting introduced to.

Then it came. "how much money have yu raised? And for whom? AHA. "6 thousand i said...for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundati on"

Thats when it came, the scowl. and followed just after that by..."Well, with that far that yu have walked, by now i would have expected yu to have raised at least 100,000 dollars!" and... "The Juvenile Diabetes Fioundati on only takes care of about 10% of all diabetics...you should be supporting the American Diabetes Association!"

This guy was serious. He was not smiling. And he was making mwe nervous.

I have always said that my main goal (as i reittered to Dick) was to raise awareness. Fundraising is a horse of a different color and it is exhausting. It is

enough to just walk.

Dick however is the king of getting money. He averages about a dollar per Mt Vernon resident each year. Translation; 16,000 residents.

He does so with a "kiss the pig" gimmick, both live pigs and pinata like piggy bank pigs. Course Dick lives in one place... as i reminded him... and i am on the go. Logistically the odds are in his favor.

He understood a bit later how hard it is and offered to help. He gave me the number of an ADA representative in St Louis that would certainly listen to me.

And so it was that the end of my day was met with a wakeup call from a fellow diabetic who thinks i should be doing more. I'll try of course. but the years have shown me that if i'm not Lance Armstrong it is close to impossible to get the ADA's attention or the attention for any other group to really get behind the walk.

For now its, as i said it was, an awareness campaign that IS succeeding in getting the word out. An article comes out tomorrow and St Louis media is already clamoring to meet me when i cross the state line.

But i'll give him this. Dick is one heck of a guy. And he is a hero. All-be-it a rather persuasive and high expectation like type guy.

Whew... i need an aspirin.

Cesar Becerra
Mt Vernon, IL

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6 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day Two, Mt. Vernon Entry and The RegisterNews gives me lift/copy

My wake up call was quite a treat this morning since i never put in for one. but there it was at 9:45, as i sleepily tried to guess who this was waking me out of my beauty sleep. HA!

On the other line was Gregory Norfleet, Associate Editor at the Register News of Mt Vernon who was interested in my story. I had walked into town yesterday and on the way to my hotel, i walked past the newspaper office and left a business card with the back room staff. apparently it worked.

Not only was i gonna be able to get my message out about exercise and Diabetes being the beginning of a new chapter (not the end) in anybody's life... but Gregory, in need of a good photo to go with the interview offered to drive me 8 miles south of town to the community of Opdyke, where i left off long ago.

OK, OK, maybe i urged him it would be fortuitous to drive me out. But hey, he needed a story and i needed a ride. Trail Magic at its best. So with my morning coffee stirred, Gregory pulled up and away we went.

as we pulled closer to Opdyke, i noticed the American Flag just outside the town that was my marker to where i left off when a kind farmer pulled over and gave me a lift into town.

Gregory explained that the flag was placed there in the field and has been flying since sept 11th. Gregory kindly helped snap a photo with my disposable camera and i sat back on his car's trunk as he interviewed me for an hour.

Yes, i can talk. I know there is not that much room in the paper for such a long piece but Gregory was interested in all sorts of details. I was impressed. should be a thorough piece, coming out tomorrow... look for it in the link below.

He took a few shots from all angles and away we went and away i went barreling down the road on a good clip.

The day was gorgeous. Sunny, hot but a bit windy. A few farmsteads gave me pause to reflect on what a gift it is to take in all the space, peace and vast carpets of green.

At one farm i saw an "only in small town life" example of a small stand of guords for sale. One bin was the dollar bin. Small guords. The two dollar bin had larger ones. but the money taking system was the real gem. A Maxwell House Coffee Tin!

You got it. The honor system. This just wouldnt fly in any big or even medium sized city. It goes without saying i'm sure that if i had checked the front door of the house, it probably would have been unlocked!

That kinda place. Mt Vernon finally came into view 8 miles later. I ate my lunch under a tree and headed to the library then dropped by the newspaper office to see if Gregory needed any other details for the story. He did. and luckily just afterwards, i was introduced to Dick Jones... a Diabetic Dynamo who has put Mt Vernon on the map as far as fundraising for the cause goes.

I was not prepared for Dick when he assaulted me (in a good way of course) with a round robin of questions and challenges. I'm still shaken so i'll continue that story tomorrow. But lets just say, meeting Dick Jones was why i had to walk thru Mt Vernon. The worldwalk's composition might be changed forever thanks to him lighting a fire under my New Balance Shoes!

Stay tuned.

Look for Gregory's story tomorrow at;

www.register-news.com

5 Jun 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The World Walk begins again, Day1, Mt Vernon IL, arriving

It was like breathing fresh air again. A different type of air. My life is blessed dont get me wrong. I have had all kinds of good luck, good fun, good work, good experiences... over the past 3 or 4 months since taking a long break to work my season of touts and a slough of professional organizing jobs.

But to be out on the World Walk again. That is just in another category for me, Another type of high. And believe me that is saying alot since i have been on plenty of highs recently.

But i'm back. A 8 hour Greyhound Trip from Chattanooga to Mt Vernon had me out in the 4pm sun and heat making my way back to position at The Royal Inn where i stopped long ago. When my pack was heavy. When it was still winter.

Now i've got a tiny backpack. No tent. No sleeping bag. No extra layers. I'm free of the bulk and loving it. Well ok almost free. I've got 15 pounds in there but most of it is food and water and lots of little doo dads that thankfully since my religion in "thorough hiking" ... i will be leaving most of it behind each day as i utilize a taxi to shuttle me to and from each days section as i huddle around Mt Vernon for a few days.

Technically i'm actually south of here 8 miles so tomorrow i will walk from Opdyke, IL back to my hotel room with its chilled airconditioning beckoning me to kick back and zone out on MTV, HBO and the like. But trust me that will be after a few grueling hours of baking and walking in the sun.

So i only walked 4 miles today from the bus station to the hotel and it was

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glorious. Small town life. Ahhh, to me there is nothing like it. Small sidewalks. People outside messin with their yards. Kids playin. The mail being delivered by hand...door to door.

Small things but big gifts when yu've been in big city life dealing with stuff and suburbia and traffic.

Stay tuned...

Cesar Becerra
Mt Vernon IL

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2 May 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Reached 3000 viewers; Cesar thanks yu with 3 big essay blogs

One of the reasons this site has been sparse on the blog postings is that i have been switching gears on adding and working on three big essays on my www.planetcesar.blogspot.com site that can also be accessed by clicking an f hyperlinking on the notebook graphic at www.planetcesar.com entitled "bigger picture essays"

The first of which if yu go to www.planetcesar.blogspot.com

will be a story on my take on IKEA, the second will be on my Cousin who escaped Cuba and the third new one is of an up in coming talented artist named Jenn Taranto that i met inside a subway stop in Boston.

These are a little gift to all that have supported me in reading and re reading my blogs on globenotes but remember to visit all my blogs, there will be a new one soon at my myspace site soon to come

so rejoice, 3000 of yu all have peeked into my world and i thank yu

now quick click over to

www.planetcesar.blogspot.com

or click on notebook that says "bigger picture essays" at

www.planetcesar.com

cheers, i'm off to st augustine then philadelphia working so i could be gone for a bit

cesar becerra
chattanooga, TN

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30 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Writers Block over; Nuetral Zone of Chattanooga is calm B4 Storm

I know i know, its been far too long since i wrote. Been busy making money or shall i say making up for money lost in last year's medical kidney stone debacle. but its all back and accounted for.

Guess even i have my comfort zone of a minimum i like to keep before i hit the road again...plus of course its hard to say no to jobs that i dont even consider jobs. Touring and estate sales. What more joy is there out there than showing people things and helping them get rid of things! Some of which were bought on trips.

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so i've got two more trips (St augustine and Philly) then one more estate sale, maybe one more organization job and an appearance at Trail Days.

after that i hit the road jack to walk hopefully all of June and July and Aug. With a few breaks in between of course.

I am hous sitting at the moment at Bill and Becky's home in Chattanooga, also known as the temporary home of what is left of my stuff. For the record though it is spaced out, all can fit in about 4 to 5 boxes. Still battling paper but that might just be a reality i will just have to make peace with.

i'm starting to think a paperless life is just not in the cards.

I'm making a shift this week back to my big blogs or more serious essays (not that these arent serious) at blogspot. Working on three simultaneously. One on Ikea, one on my cousin from Cuba who just escaped and one on Jenn Tarranto the subway singer who's album debuts on May 5th.

So stay tuned.

Yesterday i got new glasses after realizing that my old ones had so many scratches on them it was getting to be ridiculous. I got me some cool ass Brooks Brothers at a substantial discount although it still hurts to pay 229 bucks for glasses! but that would have been a hundred bucks more so i snapped them up.

I also bought some new New Balance shoes today at 66 bucks. so for me the money is flyin out my wallet though i cant complain, i do with out much expenditures through most of the year so its time to let it fly a little.

You may or may not have noticed some new photos of me on the photo gallery section of this site. they were taken by my new pal Sherri Larsen. soon we will have the ones she took of the before and after shots of the organizational job i did in Atlanta for yu to marvel at.

Again stay tuned and forgive my absence. I'm back!

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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25 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - I'm still alive; Under a pile of stuff but still very much alive.

Yep. Still here. I know its been quite a while.

Been doin some major spring work both on tour and in the professional organizing world.

Currently i'm on day four of a mammoth, i mean mammoth major downsizing at the home of a compulsive hoarder who was recommended again by word of mouth.

I'm getting some reputation cuz yesterday the phone rang again for yet another job in Atlanta.

Atlanta has a stuff problem for sure. In just the past year i have now had 5 clients and billed over or nearly \$10,000. I wish i were kidding, cuz the big lesson about stuff is taht if yu dont handle it well or have too much of it, it will cost yu money to have it, deal with it, and ironically to get rid of it.

But yuv heard me say this before so i dont want to bore u with yet another story like this. But i will do this, i will zap u my final report to the client taht i always send out after a job is done.

Brace yourself, if you think I'm being too picky or strict, just know this person (who will remain anonymous) had so much stuff that there were literally narrow trails going around the house.

My pal Sherri who took some photos will be posting a few at a hyper link I will share with you all when I get them all on one page. For now check out the photo I have posted on the main site or in my globenotes photo section for a taste. The one with boxes and stuff behind me.

ok here goes

Comments, Consultation, Strategy for future; ????? Residence (I'm keeping this anonymous)

First of all, I congratulate you on your courage and risk of putting yourself in a position of growth and for opening your house and space to an outsider. I understand how much of a trust issue that is. It doesn't always go well or smoothly but we got through it all.

Below are suggestions that I feel can really help you on your quest not only to downsize and streamline but also deal with problematic issues that plague you and ended up costing you time, frustration, paralyzation and stress.

I say that so you know that if you can follow the initial (part A) below you are half way there.

Part A; maybe now maybe when you move into new place.

The biggest thing that is at issue with organization/disorganization is the difference between having one set of major trash receptacles and 5 stations that I propose you put together. Each one has no less than 2 medium size (25 to 30 inch tall) kitchen garbage plastic trash cans.

One at each station will always be for trash. The other for recycling.

So that.....

next to lazy boy chair in front of TV you can be eating meal and afterwards throw the meal plastic container, the forks and spoons and napkins (trust me, throw them out - or don't pick them up at place - don't let them place it in bag and think about going natural with that one, so you can just have your main, washable napkin) away in trash bin. next to that if there is anything like a plastic bottle or container that is for recycling, then you can toss that inside the recycle bin, RIGHT AT THAT TIME. it is imperative that you not put it on floor or leave it on surface.

Basically your desire to recycle backfires and you leave recyclables lying around everywhere, so if you can have that there you are golden, course there is a follow thru I'll talk about later. But it all has to do with a logistical matter of being far away from your main bags or bin in kitchen, but trust me if you do not do this you will not (immediately for now) be in the habit of getting up to place them away.

DO THE SAME TO THE FOLLOWING AREAS;

two bins, one trash, one recycling (you can separate bottles and paper later) at;

next to your computer desk
in kitchen
in bathroom - in each one
in bedroom
in any other extra room

NOW.....

That is only half the battle

The real follow thru is regularly taking this stuff out and away. I would suggest at first you hire somebody weekly for like 20 bucks each Friday, just to go around and empty and consolidate those stations...i'm afraid, though you can prove me wrong, that you have a habit of just not taking this out, i mean that is an understatement, but i think you can unblock yourself by feeling it in your wallet, for a week or two till you say, hey wait, i'd like to save that 20 bucks, i'll do it. but until then, gain i could be wrong, i think you need help taking stuff away. ON A REGULAR BASIS.

OK

the bin thing is key, here is the rest.

DO NOT BUY ANY MORE CLOTHING....UNTIL (see i'm not saying permanently) you decide on how many pants shirts etc you need in your life and downsize that. YOU ARE DROWNING IN CLOTHING and you are spending way too much on it, only in the sense that there is a lot you have never worn.

Magazines; 95% of all magazines i saw were never opened, maybe in the future it will be different but for now YOU HAVE NO TIME TO READ THEM, trust me here. Same with newspapers. Try and read the weeklys at a coffee house and clip out what you are interested in, and leave the coffee behind or ditch it right when you finish it when you get home.

Mail; Open mail immediately, and throw out what you don't need of it particularly extra ad stuff slipped into envelope, extra envelopes, and just keep the document needed. Try and get on that lost that stops junk mail from coming over. 75% of all that i saw was direct unsolicited junk mail. You don't need it.

Kitchen; eat your food, i will be monitoring - when and if you want me back - what you have eaten on that shelf. It is money wasted when you don't eat it. Stop buying bars impulsively, you have too many, eat them. Cook some food. I heated up some of the freezer stuff hope you didn't mind. There is good food there. I know this week you can claim you did so cuz i was busy here but you now have your kitchen and you should use it. There is a lot wasted on the kitchen stuff.

there is more but the rest is drastic and i feel you will be ready for that in stages as you proceed in future.

There is still a lot to do, but i know you are in another category now. OUT OF THE DANGER ZONE. Please keep it that way, by simply, on a regular basis, getting stuff out of the home, particularly trash, the other way is to try not to bring it home. Think about what you are grabbing each day, know that it will get you into that danger zone if you do not have a plan for it as soon as you pick it up. As you approach your door you should already be asking, "ok what is in my hands, what is my plan to get rid of it once i do what i want to do with it" and then follow thru.

Yesterdays mail is a good example, it came in but i noticed you did not open it. I know that is before you read this, but i put it inside the plastic brochure organizer on kitchen counter. try and tackle that tonight.

Everything you read above is up to you, it's not meant to bitch at you, it is meant to make you think of how you can come up with your own strategy if even different from mine.

Cesar
Professional Organizer
Nomad
World traveler
Former Compulsive Hoarder

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16 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - My job ends & a new one begins; Receks get over 1st downse hurdle

Even i was impressed. I mean i strive to get rid of everything. Now it never really all goes totally but alot of it. But on this occassion i would say about 90% of everything left in the house was gone!

7am that morning the house still looked like a home. But by 5pm, it was a barren house. A small pile in the garage awaited pick up by a local charity and there was only one big set of furniture left, but even that had two potential buyers that i had written their phone numbers.

But basically an empty house gave Janice and Chris a calm before the storm sense of equilibrium on a week that will no doubt be quite a challenge to their sanity.

By Saturday they will be in thier new home. Unfortunately one that is already ggiving them some problems in cost over-runs with their contractor who informed them of about 6,000 dollars worth of previously unseen problems.

So, i know that was weighing in on them when the day begun. Which exacerbated the fact that they still had stuff, which in turn made them direct me to go lower on prices that on this second day.

"We need to have it out." I remember Janice saying, with a noticeable tinge of desperation. There just comes a time in each of these sales or processes of putting these sales on the makes the owners just give in and pray for it all to just be over.

You have to remember, home is usually a sanctuary but during these moments, home now becomes chaos, but now the neighbors are invited and all yur dirty laundry is out for everybody to see!

"Boy, all our secrets are out!" Janice said on several ocassions. And she's not kidding.

The great part about today was that all the big pieces were sold. The entertainment center that weighed more than Mt. Fuji went early for \$500 to a repeat customer. The White Ash dining room set went by mid day with a down payment of 50 bucks and a balance later of 350. The living room desk, 200...gone by 2pm. And hundreds of small items ranging from 1 to 5 dollars flew out the door.

At 10 minutes till 5pm we called it. It was over. I helped the Receks clean up, make piles for trash, for donations and for pick up. We moved the massive desk unit that was so big one door had to come off its hinges for it to escape the house.

My conclusion will be soon, gotta go.

Cesar Becerra
Lawrenceville, GA

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15 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Pulsing Feet, Disappearing House and the Garage Sale Bandits!

Man i'm tired. Its now 2:20pm and i've been up since 5:30 on the mi an day of the sale and just now...have had some time to squirrel away and write an encapsulation of something that is sorta indescribable.

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Sorry if i butchered that word. But i have things and numbers and deals in my mind. But i have had great fun, have made lots of new friends, gotten lots of compliments, made sales and at times debated the current price of wicker lawn furniture....far more that i care to debate.

The house is nearly empty. With the exception of the big wicker dining set, all big items have been sold and that one no doubt will go. In one pocket is 250 bucks in small bills, the other has lots of notes and phone numbers as to who is interested in what pieces in case they dont sell by 5pm.

I do not leave anything to chance and i dont like to have much left over. In fact some parts of the house look completely empty. In a sense, Janice and Chris have moved, only their movers are about 250 little individual mouse-like people who have carted this stuff away. One piece at a time.

I am cleaning up as we go so i dont leave their house a mess. It is enough of a shell shock to have this go on all day, and quite another to see yur house looking like downtown Beirut!

Whoops, another customer....gotta go. stay tuned.

Cesar Becerra
Fayetteville, GA

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15 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Attending to Chaos; My specialty is other peoples nightmare.

First itw as a trickle, then a flood. And just before 5:15, just 15 minutes after the official start to the sale there were no less than 40 souls inside the Recek's home.

How much is this? Are u selling this table? Is everything for sale? How bout 40 bucks for this painting!

The questions came hard and fast. I would disarm them when they'd recoil and say, "can u do any better?" and i'd counter "of course, if ya buy more i'd be willing to give ya 20 bucks off that"

And so it went the volley, positioning, counteracting of deals, moves, snickers and smiles. Folks grabbing this and that, lugging it around the house as if their lives depended on it.

One person's downsizing stuff is another person's treasure. And the Receks were making people happy thru me.

We had a successful first day that is for sure. The place looks less crowded, the downsizing really begun. Tomorrow the rest of the crowds come at 7am, but i bet a few will stagger in at 6am, looking for....a deal...the best deal....a bargain.

And they will leave with one. If i can help it.

Cesar Becerra
Fayetteville, GA

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14 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Little Cesar amd his all terrain Radio Flyer; Day two of the Recek's moving sale.

When i was a kid i had this red wagon. A beautiful thing i remember getting from "Santa Claus" under the christmas tree at "la casita de miller" (my boyhood home on

milller drive in western dade county).

Man that thing was red. Red, Red Red. with thin black tires, white rims and a beautiful black handle. I'd put whatever inside that thing. Tools, toys even feux fire fighting equipment that my brother and i would use to fight fake fires in our back yard.

Fire fighter helmets covering our tiny heads we raced out of the utility room and into the yard around the mango tree, then the ficus tree and over to blacky (my labrador retrievers house) to douse the imaginary flames.

So today i was introduced to the mother of all Radio Flyers, or for that matter... wagons, this one was not red but green with black plastic siding but it had wheels that would do well in lets say... Iraq!

Fat, big, air filled wheels. On it i plopped signs, staple guns, hammers, tape, markers, and wood slats that i would use in creating the signs that i would place all around the community to lead people into the sale. On top of it all was a yellow handled pick-axe!

I was a sight. Bounding up and down the lanes and small highways for two hours making sure i got every approach, every turn... there i would place my signs. One by one, until the wagon was emptied.

Back at the house, i further consolidated all items and shooed away early birds. They are hawks that try - no matter how many signs i put up that say 5pm! They would ignore them, act stupid and peir over my shoulder asking me if they can come in. Arghhh.

So the sale starts at 5, that is about 4 hours away so let em let cha go... will update yu later.

Cesar Becerra
Fayetteville, GA

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14 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Descending to work; Logistics R Me!
The plan worked out beautifully. I set off from Miami with lots of gear in tow so i could tackle another Moving Sale for my newest clients and fellow downsizers Janice and Chris Recek.

They live way south of Atlanta, one half hour or so from The Atlanta airport. It was a trek, made possible by my buddy and one day hire-ree Sherri Larsen who after dropping me off at their doorstep, headed out, mini-van in tow to deliver no less than 250 elen by seventeen inch flyers i designed for this mega moving sale.

Two duffle bags of cardboard, wood slats, staple guns, markers etc... were sitting on the curve as we divided in conquered the first stage of this sale.

Inside were Janice and her mom Christine awaiting my late arrival so i quickly went on tour as Janice explained what was going and what was staying inside this mammoth 2 story home in Fayetteville, GA.

Janice was headed out to meet with her contractor to review work being done on their new home which has three less rooms than her current 6 bedroom. Turns out the kids she intended to house during holiday breaks tended to stay away more often than visit.

So downsizing they go. Into the scary abyss that will give them a new dose of reality on just how much "things" really impact their lives. There are two big issues on suff.

First there is cost;

original cost that they paid for things, verses what we can get on the street or what they are worth now. I go around asking what they paid for an item and when they paid for it. I will then gauge their comfort level on how low they can go. Its tricky sometimes, cuz we didnt go over everything before they took their daily dusk stroll, when some folks came by to buy a full size mattress and sheets for 250 bucks....original cost by the way was about 500 if u count the sheets too. In any case, the couple asked about a side table piece from pottery barn that i thought would move for about 100. It did. But i took a risk cuz we had not discussed just how much they paid on that item. Turns out they purchased it for 600 and were hoping to get 300, so i went too low. I know quite a bit but i dont know it all. I need to make that up to them. But still i could see the pain on their face on that one. We quickly went inside and began discussing prices on everything else.

There then is the weight;

physically...of course the actual moving of the items and then emotionally, the thoughts that come into yur mind when a piece is about to be sold, whether they should sell it and where they can put it if they do decide to bring it along. It all stifles free time because yur thinking so hard about something that previously was just sitting there not bothering u in the first place.

Both these impact yu when yu are moving, the ACTUAL TIME when u need less stress in yur life. Especially when yu are also simultaneously trying to renovate an existing house.

Originally the Receks had passed on my services which i understood. Janice and Chris were not expecting to have sold their home in record time. But it did and a day after putting it on the market they had a buyer. and next thing yu know they had to start moving quick. But the pressure was overwhelming to make any harsh decision so i understood how at first they were both confused as to why they needed my services.

But a few weeks later i got a call where after thanking me for referring a reputable mover for her, she sighed audibly and confessed "Cesar, we're gonna need yur help!"

So i was off. The Bat signal in the air. And descended to help out. There is noting that i cant do that the Receks cant replicate. In other words this is not rocket science here.

But there is a type of hand holding folks need during this difficult and painful process that is truly what i offer best. That "it will be alright"...that "all will be OK"....it is what they need to know cuz at the time the task at hand seems insurmountable. Impossible even.

"Where do u begin" most folks that hire me ask. That is precisely where i can help.

Because i'm not engaged and intertwined on a deep level with their stuff.

To me its stuff that has to find a new home.

To them, "Grandma Dee gave this to me when little Ricky was born" or some such thing.

To me its a logistical challenge. Make some flyers. Get them out. Stage house effectively and simply. Put out signs. Send in ad. Talk about comfort levels in pricing. Put in long hard days. And....sell, sell, sell on the day of the sale.

Easier than it sounds of course. But all things end up being easier than they seem to be. Being free of "stuff" allows me the patience to deal with it. Especially when its somebody elses stuff.

Tomorrow...put out signs, lots of them. And the pre sale begins.

Cesar Becerra
Fayetteville, GA

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12 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Wine and Cheese Fiesta at 60 miles an hour! Parents let down their hair on non-school, school trip. Ironically, they were even happier at times when we were wandering around aimlessly. Cut plastic bottles served as wine glasses as the Merlots and Chardonnets flowed as we continued our merry tour.

Something about these Howard Drive Elementary Parents that just kills me each year.

Last year it was "The Stairwell Gang", a group of moms who partied into the night inside one of the hotels main stairwells and continued to get into trouble with hotel staff about their loud outbursts of laughter...which just seemed to make them want to get EVEN louder.

"We know each other from Kindergarten" said one of the moms on this trip who added "we know all about each kid and we've watched them grow! Its a true family."

They are not kidding. Complete with lots of ribbing and a healthy dose of some family "house" rules. "Anybody late to the bus on any occasions has to buy a round of drinks later on!"

Again, not yur average school trip.

There was a cornucopia of cheeses yesterday. Brie, Swiss, Gouda, yu name it. Small plastic knives and large fluffy loaves floated back and forth as the natives grew restless.

"Hey, lets continue this at the bar tonight. I hear there's one next to the hotel. And they dont accept food court vouchers!" The bus erupted with laughter as red cheeks began glowing in the mid day sun.

The kids were singing Nelly's now popular "Grills" hip hop anthem at the loudest decibels and the parents just continued as if the kids were sitting there, quiet as monks.

"The thing yu have to understand Cesar is that parents have an incredible tolerance for noise and over the years they almost embrace liquor as a coping tool" said a friend of mine who tried to explain the connection to parenting pressures and legal releases of stress that comers with liquor. "its harmless, they deserve it."

So, everybody is happy today, especially since i'm getting word that all recieved their 6am wake-up calls. Today its Mt. Vernon (home of George and Martha Washington) and back to DC, then off to the airport for the flight home.

Its been a week! Fun, challenging and definatly not boring.

Next stop, Atlanta tomorrow for The Recik's moving sale.

Cesar Becerra
Williamsburg, VA

12 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A fine line between victory and disaster! Touring in Williamsburg with no one at the wheel. It coulda went both ways. It still can go both ways....the night is still young.

I'm talking about another hectic yet exciting day. I don't know if this is gonna help or already has helped me become a better traveller or...this is all gonna give me an early heart attack!

Maybe it's because I have been spoiled with amazing driver's that I have never had to worry about them getting lost. Bruce and Wendy are fiends when it comes to knowing where to go, when to go and how quick it takes to get there, but as much as I would love to clone them, when the season gets started and gets busy, buses and reliable drivers get sparse.

Thus we had a situation on several parts of this trip that has made both the company and my tour skills look pretty bad. Namely, aimlessly wandering at times without a clue as to where we are. NOT good when it comes to touring.

Now typically it's not my job, but it seems like soon I'm gonna have to make it mine or else take some bottles of aspirin the size of horse pills!

Today started with another debacle. None of my tourees got their 4:30am wake up calls at the Comfort Inn in Ballston. And I had to get up at 3:30 to make breakfast. So I had to call all the rooms personally and leave the hotel 1/2 hour later than I expected!

That only gave us 2 hours in Williamsburg and a photo finish trying to get 66 souls to lunch at The Jamestown cafe in historic Jamestown settlement.

After that beautiful tour visiting wigwams and frigattes (old boats - give me a break here if that is not the right term...how bout freeggin-A man give me a break) we raced again to beat another deadline at Sal's - an Italian restaurant in downtown Williamsburg.

Sal was not happy we were late. I was not happy either. We were late cuz once again our drivers - though they told me they now knew where we were going - DID NOT KNOW where they were going! Arghhh!

Now you'd think this would piss off the tour participants, well under normal circumstances I'd be "tarred and feathered" right on Frances Street in Colonial Williamsburg. But this crew hit the wine and cheese shop earlier, so the wine was flowing and there was plenty cutting of cheese - but in a good way.

Iced, some of them were. the result of a unique non-school-school field trip. Topsy, others were. So we dropped half of the group at the hotel which brought great joy to many a weary parents and students.

Which is where I'm sitting now awaiting the next journey to go to the night Ghost Tour at 7:45pm.

I will probably collapse at about 11 today. I have been going till 3:30am! I have had plenty of eyewitness accounts of how hard I work and many that have seen me hardly working while I don my tour guide cape, but it's these moments where I earn my money. To sweat it out. Sweat the details. Keep all happy.

One parent who saw the frustration and diplomacy on my face as I handled one disappointment to the next but kept a positive demeanor commented. "You have patience of steel!"

He's right. Is that good or bad. I used to think it good but now I'm not so sure.

A ray of light came when I checked in the group at the Hamton Inn as a cheery and very calm and efficient desk clerk named Luanda quickly helped check my 40 souls in without a hitch.

Thank you. I could just imagine as I barreled into the lobby if I seemed like a raving lunatic yelling "give me my room keys, the natives are getting

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restless!"...well it was more civil than that but i think my body language must have been echoing earlier moments of logistical peril.

For now all is quiet, but its only 6:48pm and in less than half an hour the winds will pick up again. i will don my poncho and head out into the storm. i am hoping for light squalls or the eye within the hurricane, but you never know, perhaps the outer band will whip me again.

cesar Becerra
Williamsburg, PA

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11 Apr 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - 4:30am Quiet Time before the herd arrives; Touring DC and Catching up on missives.

A near confrontation is what it took at the front desk of The Comfort Inn at Ballston before i could persuade (or get it to flash across their brain pan) the front desk staff to allow me (heaven forbid!) to put out the continental breakfast at 4:00am since we were scheduled to leave at 6am sharp!

"well, i dont know" and "But our manager is not here to approve this request" and my favorite "The guy doing breakfast doesnt come in till"

Argghh. Its the small things that really make my job a job. maybe i shoudn't be complaining....since after all this IS a job. But for years (i have been doing these tours for nearly a decade now) i have noticed a total decline in service.

Course we are not at The Ritz. But still, has no body any pride in hard work. And i know i'm not the most qualified to answer that as my mantra is "work smarter, not harder!" but how much do we have to pay someone to really MOVE THEIR ASS!

So its now 4:45 and i just finished plopping in some waffle mix to an army of ready to pour cups on the "Carbon's Malted Waffle Mix Turnover Machine". In reality the entire process took 15 minutes. Yet it almost didn't happen. Beureacracy (and this town just excels at that) is alive and well....even at The Comfort Inn! It took more energy to convince them to let me in at 4am and have my way with the breakfast kitchen than it did to "just do it!"

In any case its day three on my tour here with the gang from Howard Drive Elementary along side my trust compadre Gary Sheckman, who every year hand picks me as his personal guide on his "family trips" - Gary bypasses his own beureacracy by NOT making it an official school trip so parents sign up independently and actually come along to DC with their child.

"I just got tired of principals scrutiniZing every decision we were making. One year administrators nixed a ghost tour because they felt it was treading on religious issues! Its a f*%@#-ing Ghost Tour!"

This day will prove to be a doosey since we are transferring to Williamsburg AND Jamestown all in one day. My job is 90% chill and relaxing but the remaining 10% is hectic and stress-full to some degree, only in the sense that since i live such a stress-free lifesyle (long quiet walks, no daily job, little financial responsibility) that 10% is the equivalent to some normal person's entire stress filled daily limit!

I am able to handle the few stress moments by quiet reflection and moments where students and teachers and parents are away inside museums or late at night inside a quiet hotel room. On this occassion though i have invited my Godson Alejandro (Alex) Alvarez - who is a great kid but a challenge none-the-less - to accompany me on this 4 day adventure.

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I realize now the difference between taking care of other kids and being responsible for one of my own. Alex has been shadowing me all along and his rapid fire questions which never seem to end have taken the place of those quiet moments where i can normally de-stress.

Don't get me wrong my 10 year old Godson is a total delight. I have laughed and laughed and been filled with great joy by his wide-eyed enthusiasm and ability to make friends quick...but watching over his every move and being glued at times to his side have given me a whole new appreciation for parenting i had not previously had.

That truly is the tough work, i now realize. A sentiment i echoed a bit in my essay blog at www.planetcesar.blogspot.com (scroll down to the "My Friends bring Little Ones into the World") but did not truly understand the true sacrifice of raising them when they are a bit more grown up than the teething years!

But i would not change this one iota.

Gotta go... for now

Cesar Becerra
Washington, DC

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30 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Carmi to Mt. Vernon, part one of three

Any day that starts and ends at Dairy Queen has GOT to be a great sign of a great day... filled with good things and this day was one of them.

Though overcast, my foot felt much much better, not 100% mind you, but much better. I walked carefully to the motel office and checked out. The owner Wadie and his wife Hanan who had been so kind to me continued this tradition by selling me a first class stamp for whatever pennies were in my pocket. I sent a massive amount of handwritten postcards and mail off and I was gone.

Before stepping outside Wadie said "You sure u want to walk out in this weather today?" Everybody tries that one on me whether is snowing or raining or sometimes a bit breezy. The answer is perplexing but I say it anyway; "Every day is a good day!" and I mean it. But people worry. An aunt recently asked "What happens when it rains" Well, I walk in it!

My food was dwindling, so I decided to have an impromptu early morning breakfast at The Dairy Queen. Since I was about to tackle a twenty mile day I went for the popcorn shrimp. I figured it was 10am so basically almost noon, so it was something with carbs to burn and I had really been good the previous day, both eating carefully and not spending much. Man those little suckers were good. Not necessarily good for ya - since most of it was breading - but damn good on this chilly overcast day.

And truth be told, it was windy but the clouds held all day. For twenty miles I was covered head to toe with my gear but way less layers. It was warmer but still nippy. Maybe one more winter day. The spring has to spring at sometime!

Another glorious 20 miles of crossing farmlands, towns and vast areas of well...just vastness. Its amazing how much open spaces there are left on this planet. When people bitch about congestion I just smile. Why not try and get out of the big city

and see that its not all that bad out in the country.

The true gift of the day occurred at the tail end of that day when a case book example of trail magic arrived at a doorstep on Jackson Street in a community called McLeansboro, IL. Of the 3,000 souls that populate this tiny burgh, I happen to have walked in front of this white house at just the precise time as three teens came barreling out the front door giggling and carrying on passionately about whatever passionate subjects kids of that age carry on about.

I was not privy to the details of their conversation and I crossed their paths at such a moment that we practically collided. At just that moment, with pure gusto, the tallest of the three asked me "hey how far ya been hiking?"

Always a question I slow down the reaction to and smile, just awaiting the dropped jaw. I know this cuz one day I was once very in awe of this being that I was a former member of the couch potato club. "Well, today I began 20 miles east of here at Carmi, IL (I begin to see the jaws drop) but I began my walk in Key West, FL long ago, I'm walking for Diabetes!"

I could see how they'd look now differently at my feet, thinking "wow, he walked all the way here" I told them a bit more and was off. A few steps later the door flew open, they yelled for me and asked if I wanted a Mountain Dew. I said thank you but "do you have a diet coke?"

By the time I got to the door their mother arrived with a bottle of cranberry juice. "Hi my name is Christine, Diabetes is in my family and I myself am hypoglycemic", I thanked them for the juice then asked where the library was then got bold and asked if I could pitch my tent in their yard for the night. They were more than amenable. I told them I'd be back after treating myself to a small Blizzard at Dairy Queen up the road.

Boy was that some treat. Hey I did 20 miles and it was a small Blizzard. I chose the toppings of strawberry, reeces peanut butter cups and caramel with vanilla ice cream. Holy moly. That is heaven. Inside the dairy queen people noticed the backpack. I got both friendly smiles and sort of uneasiness but most of them really friendly. The staff at the check out counter were blown away as well. Incredulous that I had "walked" to their town. I bought some fries for the kids back down the road. I like to thank people who help me out no matter how small or big the help is.

As I walked down the sidewalk back to the home I noticed a small army of kids had gathered to greet me. I mean a small army. I think it was like 10! I held out the fries and said "help me with these, make sure I don't eat them!" No sooner had I said that a voice said thank you and the bag was snatched. The rest of the evening was a blur but I surmise those fries went quick.

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29 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Carmi to Mt. Vernon, part two of three

Inside I was introduced to Ronnie Phillips, Christine's boyfriend (Ronnie and I would later in the evening swap stories of fellow snake handling guru Bill Haast) who works at a boat manufacturing outfit near town that has a niche business fabrication chrome roll bars that hold up extra decks, antennas etc on million dollar boats. Christine works across the street from Ronnie making the fiber glass hulls themselves.

I was then formerly introduced to all the kids. There was Sara, who originally befriended me with the opening question. Samuel and friend Claudia who were with her when we all met. Hope, a young teen holding Hayden Patrick, a small computerized baby doll that is as heavy and as realistic as any real baby. She was being tested on how she took care of the baby thru the course of the week. All in an effort I

believe to both teach the responsibilities and the down side to parenting. Then there was Felicia, James and Brandon and David and Daniel.

About this time in the evening I could not keep track on who was related to whom and who was just neighborhood friends, but what I could tell is that this was that house.... you know the one (every neighborhood has them) where everybody is welcomed and feels safe and is a fun zone. Music was blaring, dinner was cooking and all were swapping stories of their upbringing there and asking a few dozen worldwalk inquiries.

By 9pm I was exhausted, I asked to take a shower but then denied my earlier request to tent in the yard? Hmmm. Had I said anything wrong. "Nope, my daughter Claudia has volunteered to give you her bed for the evening." Said Christine. WOW, I was dumbfounded and quickly thanked her but then counter offered that I'd be just as happy on the floor of the living room.

"We brought our kids up to think and act for themselves, and if she has offered, we suggest you take her up on it." So I reluctantly but very happily did. In fact in a sense with that beautiful gesture, Claudia saved this section. My foot had been acting up again. I now know it was a combination of too much weight, too many miles and I now realize the shoes have had it.

So with a fresh shower and a Harry Potter movie in the DVD, I quickly dozed off and did not awaken till 7am. Refreshed and ready to go, I walked the one mile route with Samuel and David to Hamilton County Junior/Senior school. Along the way we talked about small town life as the young men reminisced about years of living in McLeansboro.

"Its pretty cool, quiet, safe...well except there are drugs around... but we like it here." I asked about what there was to do for fun and most answers came back with a prelude of, "well if we drive to" (so and so town) "we can go to a movie, or skate" etc...

It was fun stepping into their shoes, even walking down small roads, cutting across lawns and through alleyways, hell we even cut through the football/track field. I felt like I was living through a scene of The Breakfast Club. I said by to the boys and took a hard left at just the point where on Hwy 142 it stated "Mt. Vernon 26" as in 26 miles. I half ignored it, not knowing if it would haunt me. My foot felt better, atleast for now.

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28 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Carmi, IL to Mt. Vernon; part three of three
The first 11 miles evaporated as if they weren't even there. But on this day it was unusually warm. For the first time since three winter crossings I was finally only wearing one pair of pants and two long sleeve shirts but absolutely NO jacket. YAY. Only one downside of course; I had to haul all that extra clothing in my pack that now again felt too heavy. I'm of course talking only 12 or 13 pounds here but I'm used to only 10 or less.

The only other bummer was that I was half expecting the sun to pop up, but alas it was hidden behind more clouds. I have missed the clear blue sky though I also know I have been lucky to not have the sun beat down on me either.

Halfway across that section I reached a small town called Dahlgren, IL which has an intact old railroad depot, turn of the century brick buildings and a semi-ghost town-like main street which adds to the charm of the town. But its real saving grace was a chipper convenience store clerk named Terry who served me a great plate of fried chicken and a healthy heaping of curious questions.

After enjoying the chicken and an hour rest in comfy old seafood restaurant type chairs – u know the ones, those that look like they came out of a place called The Sea Shanty Fish House – I headed out.

By day's end I had done another 18 miles and had had it. My bus took off the next morning at 9:30 so I knew I had to fall short of my intended 26 miles but my feet were too precious to push and the section was technically over. In a town 8 miles shy of Mt. Vernon called Opdyke I thumbed it and less than a half hour in both an old pick up truck and an Amish buggy pulled over at nearly the same time. I was tempted for the buggy ride but it was unclear if the bearded man had stopped because the truck had stopped for me.

I went with the truck and inside was an old crusty farmer named Jim who's granddaughter has diabetes and was grateful to help. He drove me into town just as the sun was setting and I hotelled it at a place called the Royal Inn. I collapsed and did not move till 9pm when I sauntered out to find some food. The local IGA grocery store provided a nice bevy of ham and cheese – my favorite – and I went to sleep with a smile.

The following morning a 4 dollar taxi ride took me many a mile to the bus station while I was with a virtual town carpool of others going to work and school. That is just the way it is in small towns, the taxi becomes the public form of alternative transportation. The Mt. Vernon bus station was located inside a Mc Donalds and I held my breath cuz the last time I went through here the attendant was nowhere to be found. A few minutes after 8am she showed, I bought a ticket and was off.... to my next break.... next job.... next few adventures.

When I return to the area, I'll have a 6 day crossing into St. Louis.... a big, big moment for me. I have dreamt of walking under the arch for a long long time.

Stay tuned

Cesar Becerra
Mt. Vernon, IL

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27 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Taking a "zero" and resting in Carmi, IL
I had awoken so early the day before that i got to Carmi by 1pm. But i was exhausted so i got a room (32 bucks!) at The Carmi Motel in Carmi IL (population 5,500).

Before i fell asleep i vaguely remember dumping the contents of my pack out on the floor so taht the tent could dry. When i awoke 5 hours later it looked like a bomb had gone off.

There is something funny about my pack. It is tiny. Compact and light. There are no pickets or zippers or fancy new-fangled devices like the modern packs. But somewhere inside there, in that tiny pack, must be a spring-loaded mechanism that catapults clothes and gear all over a motel room.

I could have easily ran a garage sale out of there.

Secretively i love it. On the one hand there is great order in my life...and on the other...is great chaos. But i was warm, happy and.....HUNGRY! I hadnt eaten since 9:30am, so i scarfed down some food, took a shower and began a TV watching marathon and wrote some postcards.

I decided to let my feet fully recover and today when i awoke i decided to take the day off. Paid for another night, and now am at the local library writing to u. Whoever yu are, yu now number nearly 2000.

WOW. Thanks for reading. I'm off to go explore main street.

See ya

Cesar Becerra'
Carmi, IL

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26 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Small town bridge, small town life; Bunnies and "B" take me back to another time.

By 5:30 am i had had enough. Sure i would have loved more sleep but light was about to come up and i was not gonna be getting any more rest.

My feet were less than happy but my body was itching to go. Sometimes there is a feeling i get that "now, is time to get walkin!"

"Trust me" my intuition said. And it was right.

There are small moments of this trip taht sometimes last no more than 5 or ten minutes...sometimes less...but in all make the entire journey and any discomforts more than worth it.

This morning was one of them.

I was about to cross into my 6th state. Illinois. Land of Lincoln the signs would say. And to do so meant walking another mile across Hwy 14 through a sleepy New Harmony on a Sunday Morning.

The red light was flashing in the town's only four way stop, where main street met Church street. The morning was still. The fog thick and the buildings...OLD. "1894" one of the crests said.

I was on a Hollywood set. As no body was stirring. I walked in the middle of the street, just admiring architecture and a feeling from another era. As i rounded the corner i saw this great art instalation called "Common Ground" which looked like several primitive huts made out of sappling treets and long branches and twigs.

It looked Lord of the Rings-like. Perfect for this misty morning. And a great prelude for what was around the next bend.

And there it was, just as 6am struck i saw it. Looking Dali-like. Surreal and melty-like. Old as dirt. The old toll bridge. Still in operation but terribly forgotten. Not many folks go this way, now they cross on Interstate 64. But it crosses the same Wabash River. Only i had a quiet crossing as no cars were present. Well only two showed but by then i was 2 thirds of the way across.

When i crossed into Illinois on the other side, the toll taker and his son cracked down the window and said "hiking far, where did ya start from"

This is my favorite as i can just predict the facial spasms when i utter "Key West"

The sign said 1.00 cars, 50 cents bicycles. But no costs for worldwalkers. So i waved and continued on.

My original plan was to take some back roads up to the high way, but those back roads - actually oil well operation roads - were innundated with water, so i kept walkin and studied my maps.

By 9am i had come to a place called Crossville, IL and a convenience store named Maiers.

Inside a happy and jovial lady named Brenda greeted me with a smile and a rest room key but more importantly a warm place to sit and contemplate my next move.

I sat there, dazed and tired. I was nearly falling asleep on the roads. So i bought a diet black cherry vanilla coke loaded with caffeine - a departure for me - and sipped it quick.

That started an avalanche of food tasting that led me to just scarf down two cookies and two sinful sausage biscuits which tasted sooooo good. Hey i had deserved it. And i was walking off everything i was putting on.

In front of me was this great poster for an upcoming wrestling match coming to town at the old high school gym on April 8th.

It was printed like those old block letter posters. It was orange and black. Simple and to the point. Some of the names killed me.

T. Bolt Baxton was taking on Lady Vendetta. Vulcan was wrastling a guy named "Moonpuppy" (gotta love that). And Homicidal Davis was taking on the winner of George "the Animal" Jr. and The Intimidator.

Gosh i wished it was April 8th.

Tickets were 8 bucks, but for and extra 2 bucks yu could get ringside tickets and for another extra 2 bucks yu could be "front row". What the difference was between ringside and front row was beyond me. But the town was abuzz and Maiers Convenience Store and Bobs Cycle Shop were the only two places to get yur tickets. Forget ordering them on the net!

"B" short for Brenda was a riot. She was a Elvis Presley fan no doubt. Memorabilia of the King was everywhere. Cups, postcards, teddy bears, photos, calendars, record covers. The King was "in" inside Maiers.

B knew everybody by first name too. I watched and counted. 6 people straight.

"steve, good morning, hows Barb" or "Hey Huey, did ya hear that Susan's birth day is comin up" etc

The 7th person was an outsider but a quick couple of minutes in they were reminiscing about a brand of potato chips yu could only get on that side of the border.

B had even made a birthday sign for Susan. There it was, on the side of the highway. Happy birthday Susan.

Two older men were debating about her real age and this consumed them and B for nearly 15 minutes.

Love that small town life. As i at my sinful meal i perused the local newspapers where a cover story in nearby Evansville discussed the tragedy of Clarence Bullock and his bunnies!

Apperently Clarence had 300 of them but they got mixed up with some disease and the state had to put them down, now there are only 15 left.

Front Page news folks. I love this neck of the woods.

Cesar Becerra
Crossville, IL

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Atlanta GA, United States - Getting back on the Walk; Painfull steps and a chilly overnight.

It was good to head out. Maybe too good. I was feeling so positive that i barely noticed how much my pack was weighing. Man, i must have had at least 18 pounds in it.

I got up early and headed out by nine am so i decided to go ahead and head for New Harmony, Indiana, which looked like 22 miles as the crow flies.

Well it turned out more like 27 miles once u account for my twists and turns and a moment of sheer courage where i threw caution to the wind and crossed a rather large farmstead after noticing the roads and my map were not in sync with each other.

By night fall it dawned on me that my foot was acting up. A product no doubt of both the weight and the pace - i was flying through this section and the weather was wonderful so i was doubly excited.

I have often said i should really slow down, well today i paid the price.

By 7pm i stumbled into New Harmony, a place where years ago "the harmonists" created one of the nations first areas of communal living. My type of town. But today the prices for lodging are quite the opposite of "sharing" or communal.

"109 dollars!" i said to Linda, a kind clerk who placed a call to the local motel as i sauntered into her store looking like hell. "Nope, i can swing it, but at that price i'd rather camp." She then called the cops.

Now dont sweat it. She was calling to ask permission to camp in the town park which i have done from time to time. So u know this is a going thing or tradition in small towns as long as you ask the authorities.

The police came and let me know that i could camp there even though the camping season did not start till April 1st and i set up my tent on a frigid night next to a jungle gym.

I slept instantly for about 4 hours from 9pm to 1am, the rest of the night i was restless. It was cold on certain points of my body where i came anywhere near touching the ground. But i wasnt shivering like i did when i was unprepared for it back in Novemeber in Tennessee.

So i dozed in and out. Switching positions. Tossing and turning and nursing my "hot spot" which is the term we use for a blister before it becomes a blister! I had one for sure.

Tick Tock, Tick Tock....i waited till morning.

Cesar Becerra
New Harmony, IN

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24 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Last second decision and Logistics-R-ME; addicted to planning point a to b and how to make it happen.

I'm at WIRED! a great small cafe and internet shop where jill and kim remembered me from when i stopped in on the end of my last section. This time i left brochures and bought a hot tea and used the internet, but more importantly for several hours i used WIRED as a one stop Logistics shop.

It went like this. i sent my box of hiking gear to Evansville way ahead of time. i arrived today but with my clothing and items from my tour to DC. These are two separate types of gear. One is cotton, and bulky and heavy items with a regular pack. The other is light weight wicking polyester and hiking pack gear with special

tent, pbackpack etc.

So i dropped my stuff off at the cafe, just a few feet from the Greyhound Bus Station and walked 6 blocks to pick up my drop box with hike goodies at the local post office. I got that, by showing my ID, and lugged it back (all 12 pounds of it) back the 6 blocks to WIRED.

I opened it and it resembled a springloaded mess of clothing, gear and food. For a while i looked like some homeless guy rummaging through nic nacs. Technically i am homeless (i was even unshaven today) but in a sinisterly unique way.

I switched the items i needed for the items i did not and placed everything i wasnt gonna hike with back in the same box i picked up at the Post office and hauled it back there. Kim and Jill watched over it while i went and mailed it away. When back i finished packing and made a last minute executive decision NOT to hike on the ADT (american discovery trail, see discoverytrail.org) for the following reason.

1. There was an unusually strange blast of cold weather that hit the nation just as the first day of Spring arrived. so its 29 tonight for the low and 35 the high. Although the weather will warm up and is gonna warm up as i have seen on the forecast. I'm just not ready to do pure overnights in cold weather especially since i do not have....

2. The full maps yet. thanks to the generosity of Stacy, the ADT Indiana coordinator i was able to get the minimum mile markers and directions zapped to Becky then faxed to me in DC. But i still have no maps and besides the section i have details only to the state line of Illinois and i do not want to hike blind. I HATE HIKING BLIND. I simply have to know what is ahead of me, especially since in Illinois i'd be in a purely wilderness area. Not too smart when the weather is still briskly cool.

3. I figure i'd hop on the ADT as i had originally thought to in St. Louis.

So you might hear more from me each day, though i will camp but not straight thru, there will be a couple nights i will overnight on farmland but the following day be in a motel room along the interstate.

OK, heading out just doing a few miles (maybe 3 to the Econo Lodge to get all my gear in hyper order - right now its still a mess - also i want to get into tyhe mind set of hiking, i'm still feeling like i am in a time warp, added to the back and forth i've done today, i am slipping slowly back into hiking mode but really will be huffing and puffing tomorrow as i either do a 10 mile day and camp or a 22 mile day and hit another motel/hotel in New Harmony, IN on the border of my crossing into my next state of Illinois.

Excited to be back.

Here we go!

Cesar Becerra
WIRED INTERNET CAFE
Main Street, Evansville, INDIANA

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24 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Tour ends and i head back to Worldwalk
Hey there, gotta make this quick as i have to get my mail drop box with my pack and tent.

Finished tour. Last day the group went into the capital and had an emergency drill evacuation. So the entire Capital of the United States of America had to be depeopled!

That thru us off so the great lunch we had at the Supreme Court had to be rushed and that in turn made us one minute late to the Beureau of Printing and Engraving. So they shuttled us into the gift shop where, get this...you can pay cash forwellll cash! One dollar sheets or even shredded money. Although what good shredded money will do ya, i dont know but they make a mint (pun intended) on selling money that is no good!

Afterwards it was a trip to The national Archives then a visit to Fords Theatre, where President Lincoln was shot.

Then we headed to Baltimore to board a flight home.

The kids were precious, smart and really a treat to be with. i want to reserve my full report on them untill i get some motre time to write. they really do inspire and educate me and some just win me over hook, line and sinker.

Harry Heisted, his wife and a students father generously gave me a ride to The Greuhound Bus Station which was incredible. I knew they were tired - its not easy being responsible for 20 kids away from school - but they went the extra mile to drop me off.

Thanks you all!

At 12:40ami boarded a bus that arrived the next morning in Evansville Indiana where i will begin my trek either now or wait till morning. Lets see.

it might be a while till you hear from me, so remember be patient.

Cesar Becerra
Evansville, IN

23 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - The Big Chill; Freezing Cold Wind Whips at us all on Mt. Washington Monument

The day began with a glorious trip down the George Washington Parkway. 12 miles of protected and wooded scenice roadway that leads from DC to Mt Vernon, George and Martha Washington's stately home.

While the the group got its first blast of wintery air and a 1/2 hour wait to enter the home. It was not comfy but we made it. In the sun however all was well as we walked all over the 900 acre plantati on property.

Later we headed back to DC and had our photo op at the White House as we headed to both sides and snapped pictures after pictures. I usually volunteer to take group photos and everybody passes me their digital or disposable cameras.

My pockets get filled with nearly 12 of them as i slowly resemble a thief that has lifted a pile of photographic contraband. Click. Zip Zip Zip, Click. "Ok, one more!" Click. "Now come get yur cameras!"

As soon as we left, half the group got dropped off with me to go up the Washington Monument and the other headed to the Pentagon. We heard later that just minutes after we left the white house grounds, a bomb scare was detected and the robots were sent in, CNN crews positioned and the entire place was sealed off.

Welcome to DC post 911.

At the waiting area for the 555 foot Washinton Monument fierce winds whipped at us all and i mean serious 20 to 25 mile gusts. Not good when the temp was already at 35 degrees.

We barely made it in without freezing our tails off. Some of the kids only wore a

t-shirt and one more layer of a thin cotton sweater. I was far too educated about the dangers of hypothermia and kept asking if all were OK. Really i wanted to hear their voices to see if there teeth were chattering or their words not making sense.

It was a close one, but we made it in.

A glorious 30 mile view awaited us in all directions as all below looked liked ants or a small model train display.

Later we had dinner at Reeses bakery then headed home. To our warm "toasty" beds. Tomorrow is the last day, then i head back to the worldwalk route.

Cesar Becerra
Washington, DC

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22 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Chill of a Day; Touring the nations capital with five "layers" on top, two on bottom.

Seven thirty the ring came. Wake up call for the group and as soon as i stepped near the window i could feel that it was gonna be a nippy one.

Down stairs in the lobby my group was assembling near the breakfast bar, a line 4 deep of kids fascinated with the do-it-your-self waffle machine. Many attacked the dohnuts and some the raisin bran, but the waffles were the all out winners.

At 8:45am sharp we were on the bus and barreling down the highway towards our nations. . . . morning rush hour! BAM, a parking lot of slowly moving cars trying to get into the city. I knew taht nearly 350,000 people enter the city to work each day, and at night they vacate, so its like the plague hit the place at night.

But i recently heard that about 30,000 of them are lobbyists! And another 30,000 are congressional staffers, assistants and other folks who work in the various stages of government. Amazing.

Our first stop was the Library of Congress where the group met with a docent to take them around as i trouble shooted a problem of "monumental" proportions. . . well OK to be precise, a small matter involving the Washington Monument.

Problem solved, we have tickets that are timed at the same time as the Pentagon tour so half the group has voted for going to visit the tallest building in DC and the other the biggest building in DC.

While the toured the beautiful nations bookshelf, i wandered and checked out a special exhibit on the life and memorabilia American icon Bob Hope. Man what a life he led. His travels make me look like a legless man chained to a fire-hydrant! Basically, Bob travelled constantly a zillion times around American and half a zillion around the world.

After the library the group visited The Holocaust Museum and then headed to lunch at Union Station.

It is there where we met our licensed "step on" guide Sam Parsons who toured then thru The Vietnam, Korean and WW2 memorials and then later thru Arlington Cemetary. I do alot of the tour but only licenseed guides can legally do tour in the main tourist areas of DC. I have looked into getting my license but the process is so beaurocratic that its just not worth it.

It snowed lightly a bit and most folks braved the cold. Others found their light sweaters way less than they needed. One girl said "just because we are from Missouri and have snow, does not mean we like to be out in it. I like to be on my warm couch looking out the window AT the snow, not in it!" Point well taken.

After dinner at the giant Pentagon City Fashion Mall we headed for a night tour of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial and The Jefferson Memorial as a beautiful but chilly night unfolded and by 8pm folks were running to our warm bus to head to the hotel.

Today its Mt Vernon and other surprizes.

Stay tuned.

Cesar Becerra
Arlington, VA

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21 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Airport Patience, Sleep at 30,000 feet and my so called "job" which is more of like a pleasure!

So i strolled up to the Burger King and Sbarro food court area at the Kansas City Airport. I pulled up a chair and worked on catching up on lots and lots of mail. Letters, bills, correspondence and lots of whittling down of paper.

I have "sticky fingers"...i always tend to pick things up. Especially newspaper articles and especially picking them up at airports...where else does a profusion of barely read newspapers stack up.

Wall Street Journal, New York Times, USA Today, you name it. i love reading...and more importantly or unfortunately...i love clipping out articles. only problem is they stack up. I mail them to my office in Chattanooga with codes for Becky to file. Some say "matrix" for articles based on the bigger picture of modern day life. Some say "blog" for articles on story ideas for my big blog. Some say "cube house" for an idea i have about a home i want to build one day that might revolutionize the way we build and look at home spaces.

I'm delusional right? Will i ever do anything with this plethora of news clippings? i dont know but its fun anyhow thinking i will.

By midnight i was zonked so i planted myself on a waiting area rug sandwiched between those retro black leather and chrome airport lounge chairs and made a pillow out of some of the clothes i would wear the next day.

Bam. i was out. I can basically sleep anywhere. Through just about any circumstance. And i did. Slept through till 4:30 when i awoke to get up.

I sauntered my rested body (it doesnt take much sleep, especially since the day before all i did was basically sleep on the bus) over to the Family Restroom to shave, brush teeth and dress.

By 5am i was placing the first...but not the last call to Harry Heistead, the lead teacher at Ervin Middle School who was of course up and barreling down the highway heading towards his school to caravan his group of 20 students to the airport.

I checked with the Southwest Staff about whisking the group through but they said they'd have to get in line like everybody else. they also said i wasn't on the list. No ticket under "cesar Becerra"...did i panic... HA! I've been through this a million times.

My name is constantly misspelled so they looked again. Bingo. "here you are, spelled Bacerra" Of course. I nonchalantly smiled and headed out to meet the group.

Sleepy faces arrived by 6:30. I've seen that sight on many other occasions. Luggage in hand, wishing they were lugging Serta Sleepers and pillows! But they were off from school and happy to be heading....actually...come to think about

it... ANYWHERE!

A brief conversation with Harry revealed that most of these students (8th graders) had not only ever been to DC but some had never flown, and a few had never left their state!

Its a thankfull appreciative group of kids from the lower economic (gosh i hate to say that - is there a better way!) ladder...but these are in my opinion the hungry ones, the ones that will make us proud one day...and no doubt this trip might be the beginning of a success story we might read about some day.

"Due to icy conditions and sleet, we will be experiencing a delay" Arghhh. Oh well, so much for being there early. Our flight did not leave till 8:15! No worries. I slept the entire flight and by the time we touched down in Baltimore i was refreshed and ready for anything.

A quick dial to my pal Bruce of B'Dazzled Tours, the coach company EFT tours has used for a few years now was chipper and glad to have us on board. I first met Bruce and his love Wendy two seasons ago and i quickly sent word to Mary my boss "These are keepers! Golden, dont ever switch."

We get along famously, catching up on old times, updating our lives, and virtually finishing conversations abruptly ended months back from last seasons tour.

Once in DC i gave the group a quick overview and dropped them off at The American History Museum and told them i'd pick them up at 5:45pm. So i had nearly 4 hours to kill looking at museums and standing by in case of an emergency. That's all for my first day. Some folks laugh at my day. "Is this what yu call work".... "What exactly do you do again?"

Its different, and it might look easy or lazy, but there is a lot more to it than it seems, i'll get into that tomorrow. my group is coming down for breakfast.

Cesar Becerra
Arlington, VA

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20 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - On the Move; Greyhound to Terminal B, I commute to work again.

Last week i described a not so typical commute to work as i walked 2 miles to The Skot Foreman gallery. Back and forth. One day on bike, the next on foot. No stress, no traffic. Just me, myself and I.

Well this week its the tour guide hat i don but the commute to DC (my tours are either leading groups in DC, New York, Boston, Philly or somewhere in Florida) is a tricky one since i need to fly out with Ervin Middle School from Kansas City.

I was in Chattanooga as you know, so walking was out of the question. The commute began with a 15 minute drop off thanks to Becky and Bill who now have become comfy with my comings and goings from the Greyhound Bus station next to Chattanooga Airport.

When i arrived, as is always the risk with Greyhound transfers in the evening hours, the bus i wanted to get on which was leaving due north in Nashville was booked. So i had to take the Knoxville one which headed in the totally different direction that i wanted to go.

But no worries, i had about 24 hours to kill and it doesnt really bother me. I take with me, mail to attend to, letters to write, books to read and lots of time to be with my little diabolical brain...the location of the "off" switch...still unknown.

Once in Nashville i had 3 hours to kill on a layover so i began to write letters...a lost art really...but one of my favorite pastimes...and boy does it pass time! Before i knew it i was back on the bus barreling to St Louis.

On board i began reading a book, Fawn, a friend of mine gave me a long time back...its called The Kindness of Strangers...and it depicts the niceties when u least expect it while you are travelling that mere strangers bestow onto world weary wanderers.

One of the ideas in the introduction was that after reading these stories, or just by reading them, the editor was inspired to do even more acts of kindness to virtual strangers...that effect rubbed off on me.

In route, at one of the stops a woman from Topeka squeezed onto the bus (we were packed) and she sat next to me. we struck up a conversation (here name is Desiree) and she mentioned her Florida journey being a tough one. Just divorced, low on money and that she hadn't eaten in 15 hours. I gave her a bag of crackers taht Becky had packed for me in Chattanooga. But before taking them she uttered. "if you give them to me, they will be gone!" I laughed and told her to have at it.

She was reading a Hunter S. Thompson compilation and we talked about that, her travels and her wish to go back to Florida. She had never been out of Kansas and her excitement was still riding high. I take it for granted sometimes just how much i have been exposed to. On more than this occassion i have bumped into folks who had never left their state and sometimes had never left their city.

I felt good. And at the next stop, gave her cookies, pinneapple and some hot soup. I introduced her and suggested she read William Least Heat Moon another great "highways" author, and she took notes as we yapped about everything under the sun. The time flew by and before u know it i was in Kansas City.

I hopped a cab to the airport and it is i here where i now stand tapping away at a free internet kiosk at the CNBC store inside terminal B. I have this incredible log in my mind of where you can find free internet service virtually all over the US.

In New York, Port Authority Bus Terminal. DC...at the city offices, new business certifi ctaes section. Atlanta...inside the Georgia Dome Conference Center. Etc....

So it is only 7:30pm and my group comes in at 6am so i have plenty of time to kill, but no worries, i live for this. I love spending the night at airports. i have done so at nearly a dozen of them around the US. Los Angeles, JFK, Reagan National, Spokane, Seattle, Mi ami, Ft Lauderdale, Baltimore, Manchester, St Louis and now Kansas City.

There is a special energy that abounds in a place where folks are about to depart in a million directions. OK, not "a million" but you get it. My favorite tome is 3am, when all is quiet. And the night staff is getting the place ready for the morning rush.

I always manage to grab a free cart. Note; they are easy to pick off in one of the parking lots. I put my stuff on them, then i gingerly stroll all over the terminals, stopping here and there at magazine racks and stores to just browse, read and relax.

Later i will find a quiet place with a table and continue my officing on the road. i find it very much easier and i am in better concentration mode way out here than anywhere else. Come to think about it, there is nowhere else. anywhere i am at is my offi ce.

So i'm at home. On the road. Ahhhhh.

Tomorrow its off to DC on Southwest Airlines, the last leg of my commute and then i begin my workweek.

Cesar Becerra
Kansas City International Airport, Missouri

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19 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Website takes shape thanks to two friends. Just a reminder that i will be entering a "black hole" while i travel and will not be on line for a few days and maybe more but i will try to either phone or fax in my dailies to my assistant Becky.

in mean time i am proud to let yu in on the new revamp of the website, there is sure to be more so this is not the final but its really coming along. After years of sharing space with others and generous offerings of donated sites i finally have my own and can do what i want with it (i always felt shy about asking to make changes since most of the past work has been a gift)

so thank you Jason who created and will be updating the site as we add more features and thank you Richard for scanning lots of photos of me over the years

enjoy you all

www.planetcesar.com

bye

off to Kansas City, then DC, then back to Kansas City, then Evansville IN to resume walk towards St Louis!

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga TN

PS. A big thanks once again to Bill and Becky and Marji who have been amazing hosts over the last two weeks.

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18 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A scramble to the end; Preparations for the beginning of tour season and continuation of hike...go down to the last hour. It never ends. Life on the road is all about logistics...i mean all about logistics. And if you think you can just waltz away your wanderlust, you'd better have a hefty trust fund to blow or a winning lottery ticket, cuz travel can be expensive if you dont watch the bottom line.

Course finances are only a part of it. Logistics are also quite challenging, fun and i think...the best thing about travelling.

Take for instance. Tomorrow i have to get a box to the post office by 12 noon and mail my backpack, food and hike clothing to Evansville so by Friday whe i arrive at 11am i can waltz over a few blocks, pick it up at the local post office and mail my tour guide outfits (i wear an EFT shirt and hat, plus i have to have "normal" clothing) back to Chattanooga.

But wait, before i closed the box i remembered something only a veteran will know. Gotta be prepared to send back the stuff. no problem right. Just send it in the same box the backpack came in. Good idea. But remember you have to tape it up. Now in the old days, no problem the post office was glad to let you borrow packing tape. But now no dice!

But of course they will be happy to sell you a roll. FOR 3.99! Three dollars and 99 cents! What a rip off. So i pack the tape too. Not a big roll but one with just enough to tape up the box.

Also, i have to remember to get my bus ticket back from Kansas City...and i was just barely in time to take advantage of the 7 day advanced rate. I saved 35 bucks. if i waited one more day i would have had to pay extra. But it was close.

The weather is changing so i dont want to suffer and sweat with too much. Nor do i want to take too many pounds. Decisions like that take me like...forever and a day to pick out...just the clothes!

I checked out my route too and noticed this next section will be camping. Period! There are just no or few motels along the way...and because of that i have decided to get right on the American Discovery Trail (check out www.discoverytrail.org), the newest of all long distance hiking trails. The ADT goes from Delaware to SanFrancisco. Something like 6,000 miles.

So my pack will be heavier, but the weather more mild, so less clothes, but more gear - tent and sleeping bag and tent poles...to be exact.

I'm excited about my tour to DC, the first of the season. I called and introduced myself to the lead teacher of Ervin Middle School today and faxed him some info on me and my walk. I will be flying out of Kansas City with the school group and back out to kansas city, then hop on a bus back to Evansville to resume the walk.

I am hoping i can get to a computer each day, or be able to fax Becky back some of my thoughts each day so you can be kept up to date on how my tours run. It is indeed my dream job. Imagine this. I get paid to travel and tour people to some of my favorite cities. Plus! All my meals, transportation, lodging and attraction costs are taken care of. Sort of unbelievable. I know!

So stay tuned.

Oh yes here is an update on Mona the cat that my friends in Boston had a fundraiser for (remember she had a tumor removed from her back)...well...the tests showed that therew as no cancer in the tumor...so Mona will live and be a happy (probably fat and happy) cat for years to come!

That is all. There might be some silence as i travel for the next few days, but i will try and post on monday.

Cheers!

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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17 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - "Back in Chatt" (Chattanooga); Springboard to another journey out.

With my job in Atlanta done i headed to Chattanooga to organize logistics for the next few journeys which include a bus trip to Kansas City, flight to DC and the beginning tour of my tour season and a hop back out to resume the worldwalk.

Making it more difficult is trying to be efficient about what i pack since i have to morph between my tour persona (nice clothes, even Educational Field tRip Shirts etc) and going back on the hike. This will mean packing heavy for a bit till my tour is over then ditching the clothes and sending them back to "Chatt" in the mail.

So its like Clark Kent and Superman, i find the telephone booth, change and away i go.

I'm also relaxing a bit after a week of hard work.

But the most fulfilling is the work going on behind the scenes getting my planetcesar side in order. Jason (my graphic designer) has finished the business card designs and went to print on cards. He is also tweaking the planetcesar web site to hyper link to photos, other blogs etc. Video clips are next. Just dropped off like 15 compilations of old media footage with Sherri (filmmaker in Atlanta, see www.found-film.com) where select clips will be transferred from VHS to digital then captured and placed onto quick-time files then plopped onto my web site.

For some reason i am staring at a mess of clothing that i am trying to phase out of use since winter is almost over but not really.

Itineraries and e-tickets are everywhere now as i begin to be briefed from the home office of EFT tours. The "girls", i call them Charlies Angels (Mary, Patty, Monika and Diana) who make up the core of EFT tours take great care of me as i take on their tours. Being fed-exed now are my cell phone, tickets and tour package with all the checks, vouchers etc that are vital to making the tour i'm taking to DC run smoothly.

I meet the fed-ex package in Kansas City where i will board a plane with students and teachers from Ervin Middle School who i will accompany and tour for four days in our nations capital.

There is a computer in the main office of the hotel that the staff allows me to use (unless the night time manager from hell is on duty) so i hope to keep u up to date on that adventure, if not i certainly will write about it afterwards.

Should be an interesting tour and walking season.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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9 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Art Stroll 101, Let the beer and wine flow and the chaos begin. Part 6, last entry, this series began on the 4th of march i stopped counting at 171 labels but i think it actually grew to close to 250 items that had to be measured (three measurements on each) described and priced. Five lines each one. That is a lot of writing. But i never complained and the labels kept coming.

Right down to the very wire! Like down to 6pm on the night of the monthly artstroll where by the end of the night nearly 900 people strolled thru all thre floors.

To say it was a mad house would have to be the understatement of the millennium. And on the top floor where i was positioned near the roof top deck was the goodies. Peroni beer from Italy and Wine (pinot Gregio or some other white wine) that was being served by a gregarious and welcome committee personality named Peter who joked with everybody climbing up the stairs.

"Well, you've made it! Congratulations, you win a free drink!" Folks that reached for their wallets were pleasantly surprized that the drinks were "on the house"...a details that is a double edged sword for the galleries opened for the monthly Artstrolls.

Skot knows that it certainly puts people in a good mood but worries taht maybe that mood might be to flighty and tipsy making a purchse of a piece of art a secondary concern.

By 8:30pm the crowds began really flowing in. Wall to wall, shoulder to shoulder as steady stream numbering nearly 800 to 1000 folks walked through the Scott Foreman Gallery. I helped sell an italian vase (\$100), a cord of deco fabric (\$50), two

oyster cloisters (maybe - they still need to be picked up, \$150) and brokered a deal that might lead to a bigger sale of lots of furnishings thanks to an oversize brush that was once used as a store front prop for a paint shop!

But in the land of retail sales in the art world, sales are not final until a check is written and the piece hauled off. So though she was excited about the oversize brush, she wanted her brother to see and approve the purchase since they own a paint company and a home decor design business.

I got her info and will call her in a few days hoping to have her and her brother return and buy more things.

This hemming and hawing on items can get old and needless to say tiring.

I'm only here for a week but i can just imagine how Skot feels when folks show excitement but not enough to make a sale.

In any case, all the folks had a blast, maybe too much. Most folks strolled in, headed for the roof and chilled there with their wine or beers next to a fire that was crackling inside a chiminea.

The main thing that was accomplished that night though sales weren't stellar, was that the Gallery got plenty of promotion and more importantly though Skot was moving we managed to keep the gallery's stellar reputation high (it was mentioned recently in The New York Times and in National Geographic Traveller Magazine) and not turn the event into a cheap garage sale freak show.

We did that and things went pretty well. Sure there could have been much more that went out the door but things did go, in a slower pace but the prices i found were not freaking people out, some even thought they were too low.

But the big first step had taken place. Two warehouses had been combined in one warehouse. Thus one warehouse (the one in South Florida) was emptied. Then the best items were moved and staged into the main gallery. The goal now is to slowly have the right people come and buy the rest, or somehow have an advantageous way of getting rid of each piece for something.

There is a side advantage for Skot since the loft/gallery is on the market, see www.callbridget.com, ...and that is that the place could only really be envisioned as a gallery....limiting the way buyers can envision a use for the site if interested in buying it. Now, it looks like a home.

And as sad as it might seem, i have reservations on whether the site will remain as a gallery. It is a hell of a unique living space. Most people who enter, especially this past weekend as we had the place looking like a home with unique vignettes of furnishings etc.....have a reaction when they realize that it's a home.

"Wow, this is a loft! The owner lives here! What a cool place to live."

That phrase was repeated a multitude of times, and i'm sure Skot has heard of that one like a million times. Which is why it might be too cool a space to sustain a vision that really stemmed from a courageous pioneer who saw a bombed out area years ago and thought "fine art gallery" - in many ways its revolutionary even today.

A chapter is coming to a close in Skot Foreman's life. A new one will begin.

There might be a nice transition before the next one takes hold. But somehow the stuff will go and i believe Skot, as all past collectors can attest to, has learned a valuable lesson about amassing things...and will continue downsizing.

The loft will sell. Trust me, he's got the most dedicated realtor in all Atlanta. Plus, the place takes your breath away.

And 315 Peters Street will chug on and play a new role in a successful redevelopment

and restoration victory as Castleberry Hill continues its metamorphosis.

For a week, i was privy to all its energies, pressures, and beauty. As Skot finished up with a wealthy gentleman who promised to return to buy more and bring friends...i picked up Skots two precious dogs from the dog sitter, brought them back, packed my bags and walked out as the sun set over Atlanta's beautiful Skyline.

Cesar Becerra
Castleberry Hill Arts District
Atlanta, GA

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8 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Bending my own rules; Creating a particular price tag. Part 5, original beginning of this tale begins on March 4th entry. Artists name, title of piece, year created, medium, height, width and depth...repeat. That was my job for most of the day before the preview sale and all the hours leading up to it. And i mean all the hours leading up to it.

Placards, price tags, whatever you want to call them. Normally i hate them. As you probably read in one of my first blogs when i handled Marji's sale a few months back;

"First of all, i never price anything. That is a recipe for disaster. If you do. And you price it too high. Someone during the sale that really wants that item, might stare down on it, say silently - in their mind - "hmmm nice but too pricey" and walk on by. Meanwhile, i have no idea that he or she is interested. If they have to ask me "how much for this" DING! i know i have an interested buyer. Before i quote the price, i immediately begin yapping about that object, history, popularity, original price it was bought for, how many times it was used...and then only then, do i price it....then i listen and look for a facial response."

and then i went on...

"If they frown or recoil, i know that they feel its too high. If they quickly say yes, i know i probably could have gotten more for it. If they counter offer, then i'll usually go down, but always say, "if you buy some more stuff, i'll give it to ya at that price" then i will add "keep lookin around, make urself a pile, the more you get the bigger discount i'll give ya"...then the magic happens...after the 2nd or third time, they stop asking about price and begin piling up stuff. Once they are that engaged and physically involved, then they are more likely to buy it all at a pretty decent price since now, they've been both hauling stuff to their pile and protecting their pile from the other garage sale vultures."

So anyway, i first consulted Skot on not pricing items and having a small staff to be ultra knowledgeable positioned in each room to try and watch for folks who look furiously for a tag or ask, how much for this. And then w'd engage them. We would have a secret number embeded in a code somewhere on the piece that would tell our representative in that room (the place has like 5 different rooms on 3 levels) how high or low to go in selling the piece.

But halfway through the week, Skot decided not to go that route. His worries (and he was right, more so, he should know) were that there will be soooo many people at Friday's sale that you could not possibly have an entire conversation for more than 5 seconds before another person would tap u on the back and ask, "how much for this" or "can yu tell me more about this piece"...point taken. I greed, with a twist.

I felt that putting one price might have folks look at price and if they felt it was too high they might walk by, this not allowing us the knowledge that they were interested in the piece. Plus, it would give them no time to really consider if they were getting a good deal.

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So we decided to do two things; put as much info on that item as possible to hold their attention a bit and write two prices, one in black one in pink. The black one a high price that states "was"...lets say \$300 and a "now" in pink that states \$150.

This way we can just have less staff and not get a dozen people asking a million questions while still getting people to think about a piece and hopefully buy it. We'll have enough time that if we see them thinking bout it, staring at it, or my favorite in this modern day... talking on their cell phone asking their loved one for a second opinion... then we can sinch the deal by waxing poetic about an extra story we might have.

So, roughly 171 handwritten labels later we barely got them up in time to have the first batch of folks come over for the preview party.

Skot and Bridget (the realtor and amazing gal of many talents and generosity - really i have never seen someone work so hard for her clients) put out several wine bottles, chilled in ice! Yes folks in Castleberry Hill they do it with class!

And by 6pm the doors flung open.

I'll continue the tale of the first night on the next missive.

Cesar Becerra
Castleberry Hill Arts District
Atlanta, GA

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7 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Staging; Creating wants over needs. The manufacturing of desire.

OK, so we have all this beautiful stuff. There is no doubt, its old. Hell it has peeling paint, rust marks, more chips than a Lays Potato sack! But so what. You can get old shit anywhere, and pay peanuts for it.

So how do u make it look dynamic and get top dollar (which really, i ultimately believe it is worth) for what really is everywhere? You stage it. That is, you create a world around that piece that sells or conjurs up a setting, a mood or even a new world...or better yet, another world!

Basically people want to escape. The right syuff makes them do so. Old crap really makes people escape cuz we know several things about old stuff.

For one, it took lots of time to make it. Hours, maybe weeks. Skot has these old Corbels - the elaborate patterned 45 degree supports for roof overhangs and you know columnade type stuff you see on antebellum homes.

In the old days you had to create each curve, each rounded edge, each swirl, with other pre cut pieces of wood, or carve large pieces and nail them to small ones. Well, today you can buy the same elaborate mess - assuming you want that look - at home depot. But instead of wood, its been made from a plexi glasss injecti on mold. It all comes out in one shot, one piece...instead of 20.

He selling them for 150 dollars! Now some folk would balk at that and say; "that crap came off of some building taht was falling down anyway" or "i can get the same thing at a specialty hardware store for 50 bucks" or "i saw that at a flea market for 20!"

But those folks are missing the point. Having the real thing. Even paying 150 bucks for it, is really getting taht piece for a song. It probably took an artisan, or a group of them...hours and hours of time to make that one corbel.

Skot has in a sense held on to it. Preserved it if you will and is now making sure

the piece is appreciated and inherited by someone else who understands.

Sorry about my tangent there. Where was I. Oh yes, staging. So we will end up putting that corbel with an old looking door, next to an old looking column, next to old tools. You get the picture.

Folks then buy into the beauty of architecture when we stage that. They are not buying a corbel per se, but really having a piece of a craft that is no longer around. They are owning the best of craftsmanship that that certain era had to offer or could produce.

So, we staged a section that took you back to the turn of the century, where you could imagine a Central Park-type bench (rusted with three coats of chipped paint of different colors is selling for \$2,100) coming in contact with an old concrete bird feeder (\$450).

There is a hot and wild colored set of 1950's furnishings, posters and objects that just scream out "fiesta ware!"

A section where royal looking king and queen chairs (\$800) stand next to a giant gothic mirror (\$250).

So for three days now we have been staging the place just right so that we can create a concise "look" for every period, for every zone. All to whip up another world, in the hopes that some worlds strike a cord with people that seem to feel at peace in that zone.

So that they can escape the modern world a bit. One even hype it up (we also have modern, sleek Aluminum tables - one that used to be owned by Versace, \$3200).

But of course there are many other factors that go into the making of a sale, and being able to keep these prices from falling into the "typical garage sale" levels of cheap, fire sales!

More on that tomorrow.

Cesar Becerra
Castleberry Hill Arts District, Atlanta, GA

6 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Unique Collection; Handling and Learning more about art and oddities. Part 3
Remember part 1 begins on the March 4th entry.

We crawled into a 8 by 12 foot delivery truck that said in simple black and white letters "Skot Foreman Fine Art" and headed out 3 minutes around the corner across the railroad tracks and across a bombed out brick building that in fact was as Skot put it "cracky" - i.e. being used as a crack house by some squatters.

Across the street, behind a barbed wire fence was Skot's warehouse. A simple aluminum, non-descript building where loads and loads of stuff from his now empty South Florida warehouse now sat. Filled to the brim.

"I really don't know how it got this bad." I calmed Skot's thoughts and told him it happens and it happens incrementally and one day you wake up and you are surrounded, you are drowning in stuff!

First of all we had to move the Rancho. a 1960's styled beautiful car that Skot has been restoring. This is just one of the many sleek items Skot over the years has collected.

We pulled it out to then have access to no less than one giant room and 3 smaller rooms that were at time floor to ceilings with art, lamps, tables, chairs,

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sculptures, large signs, large paintings, small paintings, park benches, wrought iron candle holders of all kinds, and lots and lots more!

Slowly, we'd pick up an item, carefully move it to the truck, place it on board gingerly tying it down for the brief but bumpy ride back over the railroad tracks and back to the gallery.

This would repeat itself all week long. It is hard work. So yes, i am not immune to heavy lifting and long hours of seemingly endless moving...but its part of the set up process. Set up is everything and i pride myself in knowing that a properly "staged" (arranged nicely) sale will add lots to the bottom line and more importantly, keep sharks at bay. Have too messy a set up and they will want things for a few pennies each.

The respect we gave these items would have shocked you. It shocked me at times, until later in the week when i heard full descriptions i would write on little gallery tags. Small seemingly non descript wooden boxes - worn and used - were from Romania circa 1892. A small wicker looking basket with pine cones, was actually a Potato Basket from Sweden! Small blob like ashtrays looking like children made them were actually designer Italian 1950's ashtrays worth their weight in gold! And on and on.

Each trip would end with unloading and just plopping down (carefully but willy nilly) all these items all over the first floor of the loft gallery. We'd stage them later. A job that will be talked about tomorrow.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

This entry is part 3, part one begins on March 4th

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5 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - My not-so-typical workday; Preparing the Skot Foreman Gallery of Fine Art non-garage sale!

People tend to hire me to do the impossible. Years ago i had friends who owned a business called Impossible Products...basically they made the most impossible things possible. I've always strived to do that.

In this case. Or in the case of Skot Foreman, my goal is to create a sale that does not allow for his regular clients to "smell blood" or that of what we call a "fire-sale".

If you are confused, here it is in plain language. Skot wants to get rid of lots of art and collectibles from over the years, but he doesn't want to dump it or ruin his fine art galleries reputation by having some cheesy garage sale.

So enter me. I believe i was hired in part thru references of other jobs i've done but also for my consulting him or coaching him on how to "angle" such a tricky tall order. Cuz believe me folks, those sharks out there...the ones that can smell a bargain from a mile away...they will want to pay nothing for something...AND expect that u throw in the kitchen sink to boot!

So the first day on the job was to sit down with Skot and discuss strategy. First i have to show up at work. Yes i commute. Well, my commute is a bit different. Basically i'm doing so this week by foot or by bike. Today i walked. A good forty five minutes took me from my friend Marji's Loft to 315 Peters Street in the Castleberry Hill Arts District where Skot owns his gallery.

Skot was the first person to open a commercial art gallery and see the potential for revamping an incredibly depressed "bombed out" area 5 years ago when he bought an old 1905 Bank building and converted it into his home and work.

You can see photos of his place at

http://www.callbridget.com/Atlanta/Georgia/Condos/30313-Atlanta/CastleberryHill/Agent/Listing_520918.html

and yes the place is for sale, which makes it a bit trickier as you will see later in the week for running this art sale and juggling visits (and making sure the place looks great) from interested buyers from families to young couples to even reps from Touchtone Pictures which is looking for a cool loft to rent for 5 months.....but its all in the challenge.

But first, my talk with Skot.

I created a plan and some verbage that we have been using in all of our marketing materials that really keeps the sale more of an event and an experience than a sale. In fact, i decide we werent going to even use the word "sale" in any of it. Below is the final succinct version from the originaly "long" version (and those of u that know me know that i can be pretty long winded) of what i and my amazingly adept friend Marji came up with;

Relocating gallery owner downsizing for move to NYC will be releasing select items from his private collection. Unique one-of-a-kind items ideal for decorating non-traditional homes/lofts/businesses: fine art; objects d'art; and a wealth of eclectic pieces spanning a variety of eras and types: mid century modern, tribal, continental, Shabby Chic, gothic, wrought-iron, architectural accents, and historic/antique collectibles. A gold mine for home decorators with quirky, cutting edge tastes!

With that in mind, we began crafting a flyer (which you can see at www.skotforeman.com and click on events and click on private collection sale - the first event listed) a pdf invite that was "blasted" throughout the area and since the site is being sold and Bridget Rigdon, another friend of mine/friend of Marjis, is wanting to create "traction" (or leads) ...well bridget has emailed her list, printed actual invites to a Thursday night wine reception, etc...

All this in an effort to get "well heeled" supporters of art and self taught home decorators interested in unique items to buy unique things come Thursday (pre sale), Friday (main sale, concurrent with the monthly Art Stroll - a night where all the galleries open up and stay open late and usually have live music, wine and cheese), Saturday (more art being delivered) and Sunday (more moderately priced objects).

So yes its a garage sale but without cheap junk. This is tricky mind you, because everybody now knows Skot is moving his gallery to New York, so they all will assume and they all have been assuming that he is trying to get "rid of" his stuff, which is the case but not necessarily the case.

We spent the rest of the day moving things from his warehouse just a few blocks away. Tomorrow, you can read about, what was inside and how it got there.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA - Castleberry Hill Arts District

Those just reading this entry...remember that the series begins chronologically on the 4th of March, this is day 2 or part 2, part one begins below.

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4 Mar 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - My talents over the years get put to the test; working in Atlanta.
I'm just now able to get to a computer and have enough time to zap out this missive.

I have been hard at work both in Miami and Atlanta but swamped in Atlanta.

Just before leaving Miami i was eating at a Sushi restaurant with Mom, Dad and Sis and the subject turned to a film premiering at The Miami Film Festival a few days from that night and "why don't you stay for it?"

My family has grown accustomed to me making my own schedule. A luxury that few mortgage paying, matrix folks have. I generally get to go where i want, when i want, do what i want, etc...

But when the phone rings or an e-mail gets recieved for a job offer of a few days to a week or more, i have to drop it all and head on out to work...just like the rest of us. Well. OK. Sorta like the rest of us.

Since i have no real full time job and in reality no real part time job that falls within a particular rythm (i.e. every other day, or monday wed and fri), i have to work when work calls.

This week it was calling from Atlanta. And the call came from Gallery Owner Skot Foreman (see www.skotforeman.com) who after 20 years in the business is moving his gallery to New York City. He has had galleries and warehoused unique items in South Florida and Atlanta.

Its alot of stuff. And this week i've been helping to move it, stage it, market to get people over to see it, admire it and most importantly BUY IT!

The sale begins today with a wine and cheese event for a selected few friends and VIP's. Which is where i am off to this morning. So, i gota go, but i will be breaking down this tale slowly in the next coming days, now that the hard work is over and i can concentrate on writing again.

Forgive me for the long delay inbetween postings.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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28 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - New friends bid Manar goodbye while feasting on Sushi Boat; this posting was really intended for Sunday night, Feb. 26th
Man its bitter cold. I'm talkin like, cut through anything i'm wearing type cold. Course it was strange to step out into such a clear and sunny day and realize taht hell in fact had frozen over. and if taht wasnt bad enough, tomorrow will be the day after hell froze cuz the temperature is falling even more. the high will be 20, the low in single digits and with windchill...well folks we are talkin below 0.

Fuuuuuck!

Excuse me, i know its not nice to curse but sometimes, its the only way to best express how i feel when i leave the warmth of any humble or fancy abode.

I got a late start today after catching up on the blogs. Proud of myself for coining "nomadic jet-lag" though. Gotta admit that is pretty cool. I had always enjoyed going from one extreme to the other. And i always knew taht the thrill of doing so had some ramifications, and that was loosing track of deadlines, appointments and...oh yes, your mind!

But there are worse things to have. It means life is being lived fully. So off i headed to catch the T to get to downtown Boston and on the way i could not resist another stop at my favorite goodwill/thrift shop at davis square near Harvard and MIT. Cool stuff in there. I pillaged the racks placing my favorites on a particular hangar to revisit later this week. I have learned to pick, put away and revisit on

another occasion to see if my initial excitement still is in existence so as not to buy on impulse.

That was 2pm, by 4 i was at Manar's home, my Kuwaiti friend and Couch Surf Host for the night who is leaving for Spain manana (tomorrow) for 6 months of studies and living. Colleen (of the Cat People House) to is off to Amsterdam today. so everyone is in flux. Though i'm a worldwalker, trust me, there are many others doing far more world travelling than i. I just cant seem to budge across the big puddles of water till i'm actually there by foot on my walk around the world. I'm just addicted to travelling slowly at my own pace and hate to travel in any rushed way. Maybe i'm just going nuts or have lost it already. But that is the way i see the world now. No rush to get over there. Baby steps.

Since Manar was leaving, her friends were gathering to take her out to eat. Six of them arrived in total. All of which were the most interesting batch of cool people with the common denominator of braniacs! I felt instantly dumb in comparison.

Lets review;

There was the Columbian mathematician/musician that works for a major mover in the compression of mobile media whose thoughts will make future video clips and full length movies transfer easier from computer to ipods, mp3's and more.

A Vietnamese pharmacist and a French Guyana/New Jerseyan chemist who both deal with pharmaceuticals, one who tells me that birth control pills are the most common and popular "medicine" dolled out over the counter and the other who's job it is to make sure that the right bacteria is sprayed onto assembly line machinery that manufactures drugs in between the critical shift where one drug run's production ends and another begins. Apparently the US Government administers these safety "cleansings" so that trace elements from one run (lets say Viagra) do not show up in your kids Flintstones Vitamins!

Then there was the Columbian MBA student who both goes to school full time and works full time, though its a mystery how she can do both.

And lastly a Vice Consul of a major foreign country who's Diplomatic license plate gives (that person - i cant say whether its a she or he) the driver of that countries fleet of cars the right to park wherever, whenever and however they want, without fear of any parking tickets. In fact, i learned both hypothetically and later witnesses with my own two eyes, this diplomatic immunity extends to running red lights without penalty. Not that that is safe (and i assure you it was done on a safe street) but that it is possible! You can also forgo paying any taxes - quite a savings - as that night's 180 dollar Sushi bill was slashed considerably!

But perhaps what impressed me the most is how young they all were. I certainly was the Grandpa of the group. Most of their ages being in the mid 20's.

Boston seems to be a city who's educational and corporate institutions care little about where their bright minds come from. How they "look" or even how they sound. Most everybody at the table had heavy accents. Their english still not mastered fully, but their minds are worth their weight in gold.

One young man is paid to sit in a room and think - on paper, not computer - punching numbers and codes through long winded algorithms. Braniacs i tell ya! Nerds if ya wanna go there. But the stereo-types stop there. They are also hip, well dressed (no pocket protectors) and quite attractive. They all think big, are worldly and want a better life, better opportunities than they can be offered in their homelands.

I'm wondering if i'll ever not be impressed by what a major melting pot Boston or for that matter any part of this country is becoming. Maybe my eyes are just more open, but it seems to me there will come a day that the term "typical American" might just be more complex than we can imagine.

Conversations fluctuated and ran the gamut from travel to politics, nano technology to the difference between the Spider and Spicy Salmon Sushi. Course we were hungry too so anything to take our minds off till our "ship" came in.

We were at Fukguyu, (of course we had a field day with the name - hostesses sounded like they were cursing us out) a popular multi-level Sushi restaurant complete with Geisha-like waitresses, Samurai-looking Sushi chefs and the entire Japanese-looking atmosphere; coy-filled pools, rice paper rooms with low seating areas, bamboo railings and a circular sushi bar with floating boats that would pass you by continuously with sample offerings made of plastic any dummy could point to if they couldn't read the menu - or for that matter choose from over 150 varieties.

And then it happened; the vessel we were waiting for slowly loomed on the horizon. We had asked for "the boat" a light pine vessel where our 16 varieties of sushi had been stored for the 20 foot voyage from sushi-chef to our table. All eyes fixated, mouths watering, the conversations ceased and we dined sipping hot tea, scarfing down sushi and mumbling grunts of orgasmic pleasure after each bite.

Manar, my Kuwaiti friend and the ringleader of this interesting gathering was savoring her last day in the states before taking off to Spain. We all had a blast. It was clear we would all miss her. I was honored i was brought into such a tight knit group. Come to think of it, i'm brought into alot of inner circles in a manner of a few moments sometimes. One of the perks i guess of my outgoing demeanor or of my worldwalking status! Who knows.

After our meal we raced back to the cars. Cursing and chatting with clanking teeth. So cold was it that i could visibly see my breath inside the car even after the heater had kicked in but my spirit was warm, new friends i did meet. Tomorrow, we'd all go separate ways. An evening filed in the memory bank...labeled "good times"

Cesar Becerra, South End
Boston, MA

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27 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A (legal) Chapter Ends, A new friendship begins; Cesar and Maud enter State Court House.

Nine AM was the appointed time. Flour, a small bakery and cafe in the South End of Boston was the place. On the window was their motto "make life sweeter, eat dessert first!" I think i had done so with the woman i was about to meet. Maud Dillingham, writer, editor, media maven and my wife of nearly 8 years. In a few hours the legal part would come to an end, but i would be lying if i said it wasn't a happy occasion.

Plodding down the side walk, trying to get around a slow-poke of a rotund woman with two shopping bags was the woman who had changed my life more so than any other person. Approaching a driveway, she sped up and i recognized the appalachian Trail thru hiker in her as she "poured on the sauce" and passed her, smile beaming, mouse-like demeanor on cruise control to get out of the icy wind.

We hugged and some nostalgia swept back into my cold bones as we ordered hot teas, a latte and some sweeties to munch on before heading to court! Divorce court that is!

Yup, not your typical sour couple on the flank of a half dozen lawyers. then again, Maud and i never did do normal too well. We took the world by storm, bucking convention, shunning settlement, road tripping to all 50 states, hiking in the woods for a year, tackling the film industry, living in remote areas of the south, standing on the haed of George Washington at Mt. Rushmore!

We did it up. We should and are proud of that. But our lives evolved. Our perspectives changed. One of us wanted to slow down the other speed up. The marriage broke under that strain. We understand that now. It took a while, but we are

striving to build something new now. Retain memories of the past, see the building blocks that were the challenging times and go forth and be buddies. Hell, maybe one day best buddies.

The courthouse was a few miles away, and though the temperature was in the low teens, we decided to walk. Our last walk as a legally married couple. It was too much irony. We'd begun this journey with a 40 foot walk down an aisle and end it on a 4 mile sprint. And on a day that very much resembled "hell freezing over" - at one point in time the only way we'd think it would ever be over.

At the courthouse we entered through a metal detector inside a building that was devoid of life. Filled with 90 degree right angled blocky columns, square spanned arches and with nary a plant in sight. Marble and concrete was where dreams came to die. A mausoleum to bring calm to the madness of relationships, contractual agreements, criminal intent, etc....

But the dying of dreams has no lush garden to soften the fall. And this place was testament to it.

Courthouse 4 was where names were posted. We had seen them many times before. On the cover of newspapers, web sites, invitations, cable TV documentaries, limo driver placards, hotel room keys even in big lights. "Cesar and Maud we welcome you" - type signs that were visible from highways. And now in a ten point font, tiny as it could get, we were welcomed into mortality as our case was to be entered into the public record.

The bailiff met us with a smile. It was odd to see a guy with a gun overseeing proceedings that looked to be as exciting as watching paint dry but I guess some of these cases end not so rosy and not so quietly. Ours certainly was one for the record books as we smiled, even consoled each other as we approached the bench when the judge summoned us.

Our last aisle together as husband and wife. Both on the same sides. Me on right, Maud on left. We raised our hands. We answered simple questions. I would peer over at times wanting to shield my "boo" from what I gathered was a growing nervousness I detected in her voice.

But she was her own island now. I remembered the many times I would speak for her. Maybe one too many times as she is shyer than me which really is like saying an elephant is a tad bit bigger than a mouse. But she did it. We both did it. It was over in about 5 minutes.

The judge left us with the words "I wish you all the best" a sentiment that we both have echoed to each other countless times in the 2 years since we parted ways. And we meant it. As we pivoted I placed my hand on the small of her back and led her outside.

Before exiting the courtroom walls we hugged. Hugged hard. And the feelings of confused souls began small steps to put pieces together. Eyes got moist and a few minutes later they would flow. Happy tears. A few sad ones. But luckily tears of connection, compassion and understanding of the realities of life and the tough lessons that hit you hard.

But the pain and the memories were real. They were ours. For many years we shared a life that only few get to envision. An existence that gave "super glue" a run for its money.

We walked some more that afternoon. Had lunch. Shopped at a thrift store. Talked. Laughed and caught up with each other. Held hands. Just like old times. The past and present melting into one odd day where a divorced couple could be mistaken for a first time date.

True love, whatever that means, makes no rhyme or reason. Has no boundaries. No

borders. No laws can define it. No law can end it. I dont want to kid you. We are far from complete reconciliation. Our lives are on two separate tracks now. We have become other people.

But we definatly danced with love's power. Like the hurricane that it is, you needent be in its direct path, just close enough to brush up against its outer bands.

Any of you out there that have - no matter what the outcome - should know that you are among the lucky ones.

Cesar Becerra
Boston, MA

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26 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Playing Catch-up; Experiencing Nomadic Jet-Lag. I had gobbs of sleep on my 24 hour Greyhound trek from Atlanta to Boston so it was no shocker that my head didnt hit DeWolf's Futon till 3:30am. As i slipped into a deep sleep the trance music softly pounded as the "Cat" people partied on.

Its a great thing i can sleep through anything, and anywhere. People are often amused or really belittled by the fact that i can do that. "Don't you carry a favorite pillow?" says some "Don't u miss ur bed?" say others...

Last night as i met newcomers from all walks of life i fielded no less than 6 "so where is home for u?" You can imagine how much fun i have with that one. Opening minds to another way to live life is indeed one of my favorite pastimes.

In any case when i awoke, i found beautiful rays of light piercing through the windows at 61 Bay State Ave in Somerville, MA. My couch surf buddies DeWolf and Kate met me with open arms as if i had just left them last week. I am happy, warm and ready to play some serious catch-up.

I have not been able to blog for 4 or 5 days now and it really felt weird. On my voice mail i noticed a plethora of "we are worried about u" messages since folks have realized the blogs were not coming in on the daily.

I'm OK everybody. i just cant get to a computer every single day. And since i am committed to travelling Jedi Light, i do not and never intend to haul a lap top, blackberry or any such fangled device. So sometimes there will be some gaps.

But the quick overview is that i had a glorious 3 day tour in St Augustine leading good friend Marji (the real estate loft queen) on both historical, recreational and real estate speculation tour of the area.

Florida can be a shocker to the uninitiated or especially to the ultra initiated (ie. those that only know it for the Beaches and "The Mouse" that took over Orlando.

St. Augustine is rich with over 400 years of history, much or all of it predating anything from that of the history of the British Colonies and the birth of the United States of America. Hell even the damn landings (both in MA and VA) that proceeded all of the above.

Front and center is The Castillo De San Marco which has sat in the same location since 1672! Its coquina (shell-like rock) walls still battling both elements and people (well... tourists) and standing strong.

Though Spain had discovered the new world in 1492 and Florida in 1513, it was late in reaching its shores and setting up shop. The French beat them to the punch with a settlement and fort (Ft. Caroline) in the Jacksonville area in the early 1560's.

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But Spain wasted no time, and in 1565, simultaneously slaughtered the French at a place now known as Matanzas - site of another visit we made to an inlet where Spain later built a watch tower/mini fort by the same name.

All this by the way can be seen from the St Augustine Lighthouse (which we also visited and climbed - talk about your old school stair-master!) complete with a more modern infusion of recent history such as the towers (which can be seen clearly poking up over the relatively non-existent skyline) of Henry Flagler's luxury hotels which opened up Florida and gave birth to the tourist boom we know today.

The weather of course was delightful. What is it with Florida and its monopoly on sunshine. As soon as we slipped over the state line into the sunshine state, grey clouds gave way to clear skies and vice versa - when we exited to head back to Atlanta, clear skies gave way to a cloudy mess.

Back in Atlanta, i hosted (at marji's home) a Frankies Pizza party hoping to gauge interest in help to finish my documentary. That went really well. All attendees loved sinking their teeth into the just Fed Exed square slices of heaven from Miami.

Frankies (see www.frankiespizzaonline.com) has been baking pizza for over 50 years! I shot a whole year's worth of footage in 1995 and have only now transferred the key moments (40 hours down to 19) to digital. So the project is still plodding along.

Also in Atlanta and pending final contractual procedures was a meeting with gallery owner Skot Foreman (see www.skotforeman.com) where i consulted him on how best to liquidate over 20 years worth of high end collectible stuff and artwork in a classy way.

If it works out i'll be heading back to Atlanta earlier than i thought to begin a week's worth of prep work to oversee a 4 day sale which includes a wine and cheese night, a thousand strong army of artsy shoppers during the monthly "gallery walk" and a weekend sale for the public.

But i'm now in Boston staring out the window of a winter wonderland with 3 inches of snow blanketing all. Slowly contemplating a day out on the town visiting friends and preparing for an interesting day tomorrow where i take baby steps to end a chapter of my life - if even on paper - since i feel it is impossible to put an end to anything in the relationship dept.

Cesar A. Becerra
Sommerville, MA

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26 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Save Mona! Friends don't let friend's cat suffer; A unique fundraiser for a curious cat.

The guest of honor was decidedly quiet, curious and perched on the corner of a kitchen counter much like a live gargoyle about to prance on something below. Only this gargoyle was no cold stone creature and far from scary.

There were others lurking around so i did not know exactly which animal was THE CAT, but i soon noticed a small shaved square patch of grey hair where there once stood a patch of black, orange and grey fur.

This must be Mona, the sole reason i decided to hi-tail it to Boston a day earlier than expected. Posters all around the home had "free Mona" printed on them alongside a cute picture from what was sure a simpler time in this small cat's life.

"Here is my sweetie" pointed Kate George, couchsurf host and mommy of said Mona. "yeah.. she's meeting alot of new people tonight." added Kate who has (i can only imagine) been thru alot this week.

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Mona was operated on, this past Wednesday after a routine visit to check up on a toothache, the Vet found out that the lump on her backside was no regular boil but a tumor. The jury is still out on whether it was cancerous (that news comes this next week) but it was enough to make Kate max out a credit card to give Mona a better life. God knows she'd been thru alot. And only Kate knows how much Mona has been thru with her.

Mona came into Kate's life in Tampa, FL six years ago when she wandered up a flight of stairs at the Bay Cove Apt Complex off of Westshore Blvd, otherwize known as the Redneck Ri vi era.

"My neighbors saw me with her and said 'Ahhh, you've met Mona, she's had two litters and has been hangin round here for a while'...I immediately took her in and gave her a home."

Mona lived underneath her bed where soon thereafter she gave birth to a new litter of five precious kittens that Kate would interview and find appropriate homes for. The years flew by and Mona moved with Kate all over her native state of Maine and recently settled in Boston with 4 roomates who each have their cats as well.

When i arrived a few months back i believe there were 4 cats in the house, two of which were quarantined with a cat flu but it was clear that a requisite to living here is that all had to be cat people.

I'm not a cat person per se. I've never owned one. I love them dont get me wrong but they are still a mystery to me. Quiet, aristocratic and at times with a hell of a personality (re: temper) they genuinely take over a home and make people into pets instead of the other way around.

Before the surgery, Kate knew this was going to hit her wallet hard so her pals suggested to put together a fundraiser. maybe the first of its kind, though i could be wrong...to have a keg party with a jar to raise funds for Mona.

As the evening progresses the jar is getting full but i'm thinking every bit can help so if any of you feel like contributing, i know Kate and Mona will be most appreciative.

You can send contributions of cash or check (made out to Kate George) in any amount to 61 Bay State Ave #2, Sommerville, MA 02144

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24 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - A Whirlwind takes me for a spin; St. Augustine, Frankies Pizza parties and Future Job Pitch in Atlanta.

Coming up soon...sorry folks been jujst having way too much fun travellin and touring with Marji, having a Frankies Pizza Party (Fed Exed to Atlanta) and proposing my services to gallery owner Skot Foreman.

But since all these have come back to back and since i am running to catch a bus now to Boston...i will be posting my blogs sometime tomorrow night or by sunday the latest.

Thanks for ur patience

Cesar

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17 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Batteries charged; New journeys await - i hit the road on five city jaunt

I got home early last night. Just went out played some billiards and just thought.

My mind is on my calendar as i just got my tour schedule for the year. And i wan to plug that in and fill the gaps (my time in between tours) with worldwalk sections.

So i'm buying a tag/poster board today to map that out. I like to see about 6 months clearly in front of me so i can see the lay of the land so to speak and plan my year. I have always had oversized calendars. tis one will stay here in Chattanooga, so Becky and i can plan movements, speaking engagements (i plan to do more) and visits back to the home office.

Tomorrow i leave for Atlanta for a dinner with a potential new client. A gallery owner who is selling his gallery and moving away from the city. So it might be a big job. Marji has put this dinner together so i'm eternaly grateful, even if it doesnt work out...for this recommendation of my services. That in and of itself is huge. just to know that someone thinks i did a good job is the bonus pay.

On monday i'm heading to St. Augustine for a few days or rest and relaxation. Then Friday i head to Boston for a strange brew of activities that include a cat surgery fundraising party, a finalization of my divorce, and a visit with friends. Then off to Philly to speculate on the loft market there for Marji and a trip to DC to discuss my further downsizing of my paperless future with a friend of a friend who has done an amazing job in cataloging reams of graphic design projects onto an online resume. I want the same only with samples of news clippings, letters of recomendation etc. .

Then a visit to Miami and by late march be back in Evansville, Indiana to head for St. Louis as the next section of the walk.

Becky and i have been tackling taxes. And she has slayed the beast. I have asked her to annalize my spending habits and i know where i can tighten up my belt buckle, only most of u would laugh at what i consider frivolous spending.

Becky's daughter and my buddy Holly Bridges has begin a blog of her own on her adventures in starting life anew in england (see <http://www.globenotes.com/htrdholly>) and it is very interesting. i am so proud of her. She is putting into practice something that i will have to put into motion in the future; to deal with a whole new culture, way of life and challenges in a foreign country. Granted its england and they do speak english but that is where all similarities stop. Its a challenge and i think you'll enjoy reading bout it.

I have been putting my energoes onto some major essays on my other blog site so stay tuned soon for articles on IKEA and my cousin from Cuba who escaped thru Mexico and is now living in Miami.

So if these get short, yu know i've been shifting efforts to the www.planetcesar.blogspot.com site - those of yu who are new to this - as now my globenotes site has reached 1000 viewers and on average about 400 regulars per month (thanks by the way!) can go check out the older stories and i'll let yu know wehn the new ones get posted.

Jason Friedman, my pal and graphics guy has designed an amazing website and now we are going to print on 5000 business cards for www.planetcesar.com

We continue to fine tune it with the help and consultation of style consultant/pal/and fellow eccentric (not to mention former and future nomad) Richard Sassaman, who has also been scanning and posting photos for the soon to be unveiled photo gallery portion of the site.

So i'm chugging along. Little by little. Re-inventing the wheel or donning a "new costume" in this stage of my life, about to put it all under the banner (or umbrella) of www.planetcesar.com

An ambitious streak is appearing. i mean some would argue its never faded out and its been on high "rev" forever, but tend to think of it as i'm ready to notch it up into high gear very soon. A snake who has been sunning himself. Coiled, rested and ready to spring into action.

But can i define a focused mission while still wanting to have my hands in soooo many pots?

We'll see.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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15 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Heading back to Chattanooga, pit stop in Nashvegas (Nashville) and a long sleep!

Just before i boarded the bus i had planned to check my e-mail but the libray was several blocks away and i was not sure if it was even open. This was a risk cuz the city map i had wasnt to scale and this library could have mee a mile away. I was tired so i said screw it, illl just chill here.

I bought my ticket (51 bucks - thanks to a 15 percent coupon i had from the previous Greyhound season - yes i take Greyhound alot) and decided just to take a walk around the bus station. By the way this was one the most beautiful bus stations i had ever witnessed... and i've seen lots.

It was deco in archetectural details. Lettering, symetrical balance, neon sign even the long radical curves and glass block windows made it seem more South Beach than Evansville, IN

As i was rounding the corner to get a better look, i noticed an cafe that was named "Wired" - could it be? - YES an internet cafe, i stopped in and to my surprize it was one dollar for half an hour of time! I'm lovin Indiana already.

Zapped e-amils out and overheard that some writers of the nearby high school newspapers were at the counter so i went and introduced myself... the next second yu know i'm yapping about worldwalk and future talks i caould give to Mary and Nick who went off with my brochures and will be trying to set up a speaking engagement when i come back.

The bus rolled promply at 6:05 and by 9:15 i was in Nashville with a 5 hour layover. I called my buddy Charles a fellow Couch Surf Hoster who along with Meg and Ben rent a house across the street from Belmont University - a school that focuses on all aspects of the music business.

Before Charles hung up he was in his car racing over to fetch me. These guys are a trip. A part of me really connected with them when i had walked through and stayed with them during my Nashville trajectory.

While Charles and I caught up and waited for Meg to arrive from work, Ben was busy laying down and recording tracks in his home studio.

The five hours flew and soon it was time to be deposited back at Greyhound. By 7:15 i was in Chattanooga and Becky came and got me, took me back to her home and the home of the World Walk office and by 9am i was sleeping like a baby and would not awake till 3pm.

I had walked 8 bdays straight through some pretty challenging weather. A part of me felt as if i had been shot out of a cannon. But the other felt so happy to have braved the elements and safely crossed another state.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

14 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Head for the Border; Exploring Henderson and Crossing into Indiana

For some reason i woke up refreshed at 9am. I shoulda been sleeping till 11 but i think i was way too excited to see Henderson and finish this section, plus i had a lot to do before my bus departure at 6:05.

First stop, visit the mighty Ohio River. I would be crossing it later but that was going to be on a busy stretch. For now i wanted to commune with it. Take it in. Reflect. And i did from Henderson's high banks which have always held back the floods that have inundated other towns throughout the years.

In fact i learned that Henderson's motto is "next to the Ohio but never in it!"

Its massive. So massive it really does look like an ocean. The parklands abutting it were cleverly laid out so as to really take its mighty banks in. Muddy and fierce is how it came across to me. Like a thick chocolate shake with lots of lumpy goo.

After my river viewing i headed to the library but not before checking out some amazing main street like turn of the century buildings that just were remarkably well kept and intact. In Central Park - well Henderson's version of Central Park there stood this amazing victorian era fountain with its cherubs and tobacco leaves and goddess gleaming in the sun. The sun! How good it was to see for the second day in a row. I noticed that the wind had died down too and the bank's scoreboard read 54 degrees!

This was an entirely different day. At the library i got my e-mail but not before being accosted by the library nazi. A lady with thick rimmed glasses that asked me 50 questions including my social security number and then proceeded to take 20 minutes issuing me a formal card even after i told her 20 times, i was only visiting.

Back at the hotel i packed my things and headed out promptly at 11am. as i swung my bag on my back i noticed it was unusually heavy. Then i realized that it was so unusually warm today that i was only in a long sleeve shirt and one layer of pants. Two layers! Yesterday there were ten. That means 8 articles of clothing were back in my pack. I can never win!

Henderson is also the home of John James Audubon a fact that cannot be escaped as u walk around town. There are Audubon bakeries, Audubon Banks, Audubon Used Car lots and a state park taht i was not going to miss.

The irony of which is the following. Although Audubon lived in Henderson for a while... Audubon failed miserably here... actually going bankrupt on a few occasions...but whats a few details to get in the way of tourist dollars.

On my route along side US Hwy 41 stands... surprise surprise... Audubon State Park an amazing park that i got to learn even more about one of my favorite personalities. What i didnt know was tht Audubon was born in Santo Domingo and moved to france after a slave uprizng on the island. Only yeras later did he get to the United States.

The park had several miles of trail and since i had to walk one mile out of my way to see the museum i was hoping there was a different way out. Cuz... I hate to backtrack! And so i did, for one hour i was back on the Appalachian trail going up and down woods trails, up ravines, along side lakes and fonally out the other side back a little ways down on Hwy 41 just before it crosses the Ohio River.

But there was one more corn field in the way and i wanted to coss it. This proved to

be easier said than done for in the middle of what looked like a dry expanse of crackly stalks was in fact a sea of mud. Thick, gooey...almost take my boots off my feet mud. Halfway across i debated on whether to go back but i trudged along. Just before the highway i hit some nasty thorny weeds and vines. This sucked but hey it was a challenge and a mini adventure.

Once back on 41 i was squarely on the approach tressels to the two steel bridges that spanned the Ohio. It was not an easy crossing. Like my moment crossing the big spans on the Seven Mile Bridge in the Keys the road swayed and seemed to breath. There was plenty of right of way space to walk but the cars zipped by fast and furious...but there was no other way so i just enjoyed watching the river, its many slow moving popye like tug boats and great big flat transport vessels inching their way up and down and under this mighty grey bridge.

Once on the other side, at exactly 2:05 and ten seconds in the PM on valentine's day i crossed the state line completing my 140 mile crossing of kentucky in 8 challenging days. It felt good. I was slowly inching my way across North America and this crossing was a biggie, for the next time i come back and leave Evansville, IN, it will be to take a hard left and "go west young man!"

Three miles later i found myself at the Greyhound station and boarded my bus...straight from walking. One extreme melting into another. No one knew of my 32 mile day. No one suspected i had just walked here to catch a bus. But i knew, and as the driver closed the door and pulled out of bay 4, i tilted my hat over my eyes and dozed off. Instantly going under for a nice long nap and looking forward to another well deserved break.

Cesar Becerra
Evansville, IN

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13 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Mega Mile Day; The Pull of The State Line, Fried Chicken and 20 mph chilly-ass winds!

I had every intention to tent out in a field today. I really did. But a nagging, 20 mph wind convinced me otherwise. That is of course the tip of the iceberg in today's tale.

It begins at 9am with me waking up way too early. I think its because the state line was growing closer. And i was really gettin bored of the same routine. not the walk. everyday is a new one. But shuttling back and forth to Madisonville. After three days i get antsy anywhere, and though i loved my warm, cozy room at The Colonial Motel...it was time to cut the umbilical chord. So i got up, packed and called Walter, my trusy but reserved cabbie at Green Cab of Madisonville.

He knows me now by my voice. I didnt even have to tell him where to pick me up or even where to drop me off. But i suspected he still thought i had lost a few brain cells doing drugs or suthin. Who else would be walkin in this weather.

Anyhow as we headed out towards Slaughters it dawned on me that my 1/2 hour commute was actually impacting the town of Madisonville. Walter would field several phone calls and explain that there was no way he could take someone to "school" or "work" or a "doctor's appointment" on account of taking me all the way out to Slaughters!

Walter is used to doing quick 5 minute runs. Five dollar or less jobs. My 20 buck commute was a windfall. Screw the locals, Walter had a big fish. Then again, this is small town America, with only one cab co. (and one cab at that), folks just gotta wait.

Walter, an elderly black fellow had come to warm up to me and after he dropped me off this time in the middle of nowhere, he beeped his horn, waived and i think said

a prayer. He had to, the day i had warrented.

As soon as i began walking in what was a beautiful sunny day, i noticed that although there were no clouds, no snow and the temp was 43, the wind was whippi ng up there at 20 mph, just as the Weather channel had said it would.

Crap! It always happens, when something works out for ya, something else is wrong. whereas yeaterday was crappy, with slow and bb sized hail, at least the wind wasnt out and the temp steady. today it was sunny, no snow or hail, but its was cold as hell cuz of that damned wind.

I hunkered down all day. Zipped up mile after mile. And the miles flew. something happens when i get next to the border of a new state crossing. Last time in Tennessee i did a 20 mile sprint. in Georgia a 22 mile dash. Today i was gonna take it easy, break down the last 30 sumthing miles into two 15 mile days. Well, somebody had something else in mind. Though it was not hard to cooperate.

I began walking at 10am and by noon i had dashed 9 miles to Sebree, the all time cutest main street of a town. Another 3 hours took me to Robards, an even smaller town and 3 after that i was completely spent, connecting to HWy 41 6 miles shy of Henderson with the sun setting. What to do?

A porta potty gave me shelter from that damn wind as i thought hard in either hitching to town, tenting or going on. while i thought i had to prepare for the sun's exit and the winds continuing rize. So i put on an extra 4th layer of pants - green rain pants - and two more on top, bringing my top layers up to no less than 6! The wind was driving me that insane, not to mention really chilling me.

When i burst out of the plastic stall. I noticed the shoulder of the road was wide and there were lights every now and then from Mc Mansions coming into view. I decided to just push on since the thought of cold hands putting together cold tent poles did not appeal to me. plus if i did reach Henderson, i would be just a few miles from the border and could do a small mileage day the next day.

I made the right decision. and i knew so when i popped my head into a remote convenience store still on the outskirts of Henderson. When i did so, the diners (it turned out to be a restaurant named Bon-Ton Mini-Mart and Restaurant) Charles Nelson and Gene King, looked at me like i surfaced on the moon!

U have to understand i was now wearing acombined 10 layers of clothing and the most outerone, since night had fallen was completely yellow - stark, raving lunatic - yellow! And so i was like the brightest looking bag-lady-like person with a giant backpack!

Plus the wind was howling and it was like 20 degrees. "Where did u come from." asked Charles. I blurted out Slaughters. To which they said, but that's 30 miles away. I hadnt done the math yet, but it shocked even me.

From behind the counter came a waitress named Angie. "can we help you?" she asked. "The food looked inviting so i asked if they took credit cards, i was down to just 4 dollars cash. "Nope, sorry." I just wanted to know how close i was to the nearest hotel. "Down the road take a right". I put my mask back on and whisked myself back into the cold.

Just then from behind the counter, I heard her boss say something but i was already flyin. A second later the door opened and Angie yelled out. "why dont you come back in for some food." I made an about face and re entered.

From behind the counter came Donna King the owner. "now you just sit right down and have some of my award winning chicken" she wasnt ki dding ei ther. . . . and boy did it hit the spot (for the record i said no thank you to the slaw and the fries)before that gift of trail magic i was seconds from calling a cab for the last 4 miles, but the chicken did it. I thanked everybody (Donna said my money was no good

there) and headed back out in the cold.

A few blocks later i hit sidewalks...finally civilization! The rest of the way, i slowed down and just cruised...i had to, my legs were about to buckle but i felt euphoric that tomorrow a mere 6 miles away would be the state border.

Heading down Clay Street i made a b-line to Green Street (Henderson's Main Street along side the Ohio River) and my face lit up into a big smile once i basked in the glow of the Downtowner Motel. Ahhhh, home for the night. After the manager cut me a great deal, i colapsed for nearly an hour, remote control in hand, still clothed in my ten layers....but thankfully not walking in the 20 mile an hour winds!

Tomorrow... the border awaits.

Cesar Becerra
Henderson, KY

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12 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Kentucky Crossing Day 6 and 7; Snow, Hail and Herrel's Hamburger Breakfast Special

I'm combining the 11 and 12th of Feb journals on one day since i did a two parter yesterday.

Sat. Feb 11 Nortonville to Madisonville, KY

You could smell the grease in the air. The white and green tiles also had a greasy, buttery sheen on them. Looming in the distance just beyond the Library at Courthouse Square in Downtown Madisonville sits Herrel's Hamburgers. Been sittin there actually since 1929, same place, new motto; Food done fast! Not Fast Food!

That might be but in my opinion Herrel's was pretty darn slow tootin food! Took bout 20 minutes to get my eggs and ham. But so what. I was there to breathe in the local diner scene. And on this note Herrel's did not dissappoint.

Lets take inventory;

Swivel Chairs made of stainless steel and leatherette. You got it! Fifty five cent coffee, poured in a traditional thick ringed coffee cup. But of course! Pancakes referred to as something else (Herrel's calls them Hubcaps). You betcha! Older cooks and crotchety waitresses with embroidered names on white linen aprons. Woul dn't be a diner without it!

Yes sir ree! This was an authentic grease pit if i ever saw one. And their claim to fame? (C'mon you know every small place like this has some world famous pie or custard surprise.) Get this, Herrel's is their world famous Hamburger Plate Breakfast Special - which i passed on - for \$2.37

Somehow a fried burger pattie for breakfast was not calling to me that day. I had the two egg special with ham, toast and a side of fries. \$Total bill with coffee \$4.25. Hey there were no grocery stores to stock up on lunch so i ate a big breakfast at 10:30, since i was gonna walk it off that day.

As i ate my meal i noticed, short order cook "Elona" had a certificate on the wall caling her the "world's best cook". Hmmm, i scanned down tio see who had bestowed this on her. Was it BonApetit Magazine? Zagats Review? Nope. Niether, it was the esteemed opinion of The VFW (Veteran's of Foreign Wars) Post 72.

I guess when you eating out of cans and being shot at, Elona's cooking would be considered "world" class.

The banter is really what i go into these places for. Weather was a biggie. Weather

is what was on everybody's mind. And really i dont get it. It snowed 2 inches and melted and everybody is thinking the world is ending.

There was this gem between "Betty" my waitress and two burly guys that had looked like they got in a fight with a paint can...and the paint can won!

Betty; Me an Ma is thinkin of paintin the kitchen.

Paint guys; Yeah, well we do that.

Betty; Ya'll do kitchens.

Paint guys; yup.

Betty; We're thinkin paintin the walls and cabinets the same color.

Paint guys; (Looking puzzled - along with rest of diner) Same color?

Betty; Thinkin bout it. Ma wants to change it around. Its all baby blue now, but we're lookin into all robbins egg blue.

Now you know someone at Herrel's is gonna get another certificate...maybe "world's worst color scheme in a kitchen paint job". This is old school we are talkin here. I'm in real America where even the invention of Formica on kitchen cabinets is a novelty not the default kitchen covering. When folks here say paint a kitchen. They dont mean just the walls. they mean it all. And they are serious!

I left them debating what color blue when my Taxi arrived to take me to Nortonville ten miles south. Half an hour later i had gone from greasy eggs sunny side up to horizontally driving snow pelting me along Hwy 41.

The day was raw, but i must admit it was warmer. Most of the snow had mented or was melting fast. All day ice fell onto the pavement from tree limbs above me. And my boots were crackling what was left of it below me.

For three hours, it was a steady stream of light fluffy snow. I enjoyed watching it dance in front of me. Twirling and being manipulated with the wind or passing cars made for a great show that mezmirized me for hours.

Three hours in all of a sudden it began to hail. BB-sized pellets just coming down like no tomorrow. The road covered quickly. My head being slightly massaged by its patter. I was greatful they werent golf ball sized, but just in case i kept eyeballing carports and farm machinery that i'd head for if in case taht scenario played out. But alas, after twenty minutes, the hail abruptly stopped.

After a wee bit of a break and some purchase of snacks at a local convenience store on the outskirts of madisonville all hell broke loose and the snow fell once again, this time it was heavy, nasty and wet. I put all i had on me and tredged the last few miles to my hotel room where i immediately thawed out to MTV, olympic hi-lights and conked out about 7pm for a 5 hour power nap.

Feb 12 - mi dni ght.

I awoke restless in my thoughts on how to format the next day. Would i just do a few miles? take a day off, or hi-tail it big time down the road and try and get halfway from Madisonville to the border? And most importantly, would i take my tent, ditch the comfort of the hotel room and just be done with this cold traverse of Kentucky?

Before i could come up with a final plan. My head hit the pillow and i was out once again.

8am - I got up, called the Taxi company and decided to take an early ride out just north of Slaughters, KY and begin walking back to Madisonville. This is called

"flip-flopping in the long distance hiking community. I dont really like doing this but on about 3 ocassions it has served its purpose.

Basically i was going to go up ahead. And walk south today instead of north. This way, i'd leave my stuff in my room (Cynthia of the Colonial Motel, gave me another night for a mere 20 bucks) and walk at a quick clip and chew off another 12 miles in a pretty raw state of a day. So as...Monday, i'd just get dropped off with full pack and head for the border!

Off i went. From my warm room into a warm Taxi and in half an hour i was dropped off...you guessed it...in the middle of nowhere. The cabbie took some persuading to get used to the fact that i indeed had all my marbles still intact.

I began walking back towards Slaughters and Hanson and had a pretty cold but pretty uneventful day. My thoughts were strictly on the border crossing now and i did a remarkable 12 miles in 4 hours. Got to the library by 2pm and am gonna get a good nights sleep for a big day tomorrow - maybe even a twenty mile day, as i hear the weather will be better and the sun will be making its grand re-appearance after a week of hibernation.

Cesar Becerra
Madisonville, KY

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11 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day 5 Kentucky Crossing; Days Inn Gals, A bird in the hand, and snow begins falling. Part 1
Ten o'clock they said. Be ready! I was.

A gaggle of Days Inn gals invited me to Kickers, a "Cowboys" (remember in Chattanooga) like club in Clarksville. And u know me. I couldn't refuse!

Nuttin i like doing better than walking than dancin!

They zipped up to my room at another Crack Motel named The Little River Motel. For a moment i thought i was doomed cuz i needed to get cash at The Piggly Wiggly, so i rang them from across the road.

"Where are u" said a confused Sylvia - the employee at Days Inn that gave me a discount who was sandwiched in a small metallic blue sports car driven by Katrina. "We are at yur door!" I waived to them from across the street and they peeled out across three lanes of traffic to squeeze me in the back of this little car.

Also along for the evening was Sylvia's sister Jessica and another buddy Megan. We barreled along Hwu 41 with a library of hip hop tunes we all knew but the girls were surprized i was up on as well.

"You know this song?" Asked Katrina. "Of course, as i continued with Nelly's tirade on the track "Grills" (song about the gold and silver - and more colored - capped teeth worn by some blacks and increasingly by all black rappers. "got me mo carrots than in a salad!" I bopped along to the amusement of the early twenties trio.

We made a pit stop at the Days Inn so that the gals can primp up. They were a sight, and i was honored to be one of the "girls" that night. This happens alot. I dont know why i'm brought in so soon and trusted with so much information.

The walk has something to do with it. It must. Two days earlier when I met Sylvia and Jessica at the Days Inn it was obvious my story rang true; I looked like a freak in an astronaut suit bundled up to the point where only my eyes peeked out as I

stumbled into the lobby wind blowing at my back, eye glasses fogged up.

Discount in hand, Jessica even attempted to contact local media. I instantly made new friends. Asked what was happenin that night in Oak Grove, they said.... "absolutely nuttin, but Thursday we go to Kickers...a club with country downstairs, hip hop on second floor, wanna come along?"

"How's my makeup." "You got scissors, this bra is killing me." "You look beautiful sweetie, like a million dolla hoe!" They just kept cracking me up.

Back in the car a small emergency exploded into a major event. Megan had lost her cigarettes in between the seats so everybody went on search detail till they were found. Music bumped back up to the sounds of "Laffy Taffy" another hip hop ditty and we were off.

At the club door we were frisked and I was asked to remove my head gear for fear of inciting a riot. It seems that the club, especially in the 2nd floor level is a favorite gang hide out. What is it with my hat getting confiscated everywhere I go? I hate that. (as witnessed in my previous missive last week about Club Cowboys in Chattanooga)

In any case the room up stairs was packed with thug-like and thug-life African American revelers sportin all sorts of Bling, shiny (teeth) Grills and logo emblazoned attire. Basically I was caught in a Hype Williams (popular music video director) hip-hop video! Here in little ole Clarksville.

The night was fun. We danced till 2am and took a group Valentine photo that I will post soon with an upcoming story on new Valentines Day marketing phenomenons. Stepping back outside took some real courage, the temperature had dropped to 20 and it was evident that the predicted storm was indeed gonna hit. By the time I got back to The Little River Motel, I was unsure if I'd attempt to walk the next day.

Knock, Knock, Knock. "You leaf today? Yes? No?" Tap Tap Tap, "hey, You in dare?" said the manager. Whoops, I had over slept. Not a good start to what would be a long, long day. I quickly shoved stuff in pack, slipped layers on...and I was out the door.

In the lobby – again if you could call it that – I called the Cab company and waited next to the road for its arrival. Less than 3 minutes later a sedan pulled up with a lady offering me a ride; "Where ya goin?" Crofton I said. "Well, I aint goin that far, gotta pick up my daughter, how bout 3 miles up the road?" I declined, she left, and I continued to be in awe of the kindness of strangers.

We call this trail magic, and it would surface on several occasions today.

The Yellow Cab company guy showed up in a beat up Impala. Trust me, none of these towns wins any "shiny Cab" awards, its always interesting when I call...I simply begin automatically asking myself "I wonder what will roll up this time?"

The cab driver was a piece of work, hacking and coughing, munching on something tough all-the-while trying to yap with dispatch on a cell phone that looked like two dogs had mistaken it for a T-bone! In the new world of cabbies, I seldom see any use out of what is now the default ash tray holder; the lowly CB radio!

"Eighteen bucks!" the surprised, bearded cabbie erupted..."Who quoted u that?" I told him someone at the office. He speed dialed dispatch while taking a simultaneous chunk out of what I can safely say was the largest chunk of beef jerky I had ever seen. "Hey, someone told this boy, we'd take im tah Craughtun for 18" Not me, chirped the lady. I just tapped the driver on shoulder and said, no problems, just go, as I leaned back and held my breath watching and praying the meter would not read 60 bucks when we arrived.

Along the way, "munchie" (as I'll refer to him) asked me what I was up to with such a big bag (by now I had the drop box contents inside so my pack had extended up above my head). "Walkin" I said "I've walked from Key West to Crofton, KY"...

Silence....

"You walked from where?" Its always a gas when people clear there ears to hear what I consider quite simple yet others categorize along side scaling Everest! "Yup, Walkin for Diabetes"

"You know my uncle used to hop trains when we waz kids! One time he fell asleep and when he woke the conductor told him he had made it to Anchorage. We never believed the son-of-va-bitch. But that what he claimed!"

As we rolled into Crofton, I noticed a slight drizzle falling. I slipped on another layer, paid the cabbie 20 bucks and some change (thank God that was not a penny more, cuz I was out of cash by that time) and began my walk.

Walking through a small town is one of my favorite indulgences. It costs nothing but is filled with lots of fun. There are the old main streets (this town had a beauty), the railroad crossing (had that too), cute wooden houses (check as well! And with little window dressing tchotchkes to boot) and curious doggies. In this case it was a brown lab that wanted to follow me and did for a mile or so, until I fed it some ravioli and sent it walking back home. He obeyed and I went along.

Three miles in I came upon a great big cemetery that I always choose to explore. A few days back I had uncovered an ancient one as I had a snack. These are not ur ordinary ones. These puppies are the old style pioneer ones with days beginning at the 1860s and topping off at turn of the century. "1902" was the latest inscriptions I could barely make out on the faded stones.

Just by pure coincidence (or not) a few steps later upon exiting my attention was drawn by a bird flapping around the ground. It was obviously wounded and I guess he (or she) thought I was a predator. It wriggled, caught flight but soon landed in a ditch. Curious, I went down and checked on it.

Cesar Becerra
Madisonville, KY

see part 2 below

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10 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day 5, Kentucky crossing, Part 2

One of my earliest memories as a child was finding a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest and onto the ground next to our small Mango tree in western Dade County (Miami). I brought it in, put it in a box and tried desperately to nurse it back to health. I was intrigued by seeing a living creature that did not come from a pet shop or was prancing on a National Geographic special. My mom kindly prepared me with the sad reality that it was just not going to make it. A thought that did not comfort me. It died soon after and I buried it, but not before I got to study, pet and hold it for hours, despite my mom's pleas that I refrain from such actions so as to avoid both catching a disease or wounding my heart.

I bent over and picked up the beautiful black bird. Its neck had a pearlescent oil slick like purple band shining through its black feathers. Its eyes were a stark yellow and its feet were kicking but it soon grew limp. It was downright cold. And I slip off my gloves for few things this time of year...for seconds later, my hands turn to ice. But I slipped them off, held the bird and ran my fingers along side its back.

Soft is too generic a term to describe how downy this creature felt. I thought of the baby bird from youth and realized...there was nothing I could do. But for a moment, I had the gift of coming up against nature... regular black bird or not...and a peace ran over me as I placed it gently down on a bed of leaves. I noticed though this time, as my hands left its body, it was no longer moving. Where a second ago it fended for its last breath of life, it actually died in my hands!

What it meant I do not know but I resumed my walk knowing I had been touched.

An hour later, drizzle became all out snow falling. Forget flurries, this was the real stuff. White just came down everywhere and soon I was bundled in 5 layers on top and three pants on bottom. Face practically covered less my protruding eye glasses which by now were sorta iced over. I was peering above there rim as I treaded along for miles until I reached Nortonville's Post Office where a fellow diabetic named Charles gave me a lift into Madisonville.

I checked into the Colonial Motel (the owners gave me the 1st night for 30 and second for 20 bucks), I zapped two meals in the microwave and slept/thawed out for 5 hours. The rest of the night I caught all I could catch of pop culture on MTV and VH1. By 4 am I was ready to catch another sleep marathon, and did so till 10am the next day.

Cesar Becerra
Madisonville, KY

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9 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day 4 Crossing Kentucky; Motel 7, "The Hitchcock Birds" and Thumbing it!

The old metal pockmarked sign was barely... i mean barely hanging on. Most of it was clear from the distance as I treaded through my last mile as the flurries turned into a mini blizzrd. MOTEL it read, and faintly through the rust and peeling paint I could make out the numeral 7.

This must be it. Thank God. My day is over.

Actually one more challenge; checking in! This proved to be a doosey. A skinny Marge (from the Simpsons) looking Indan lady popped through a wallpapered hidden door after I pressed the call button. It sorta startled me cuz I really couldnt even tell there was a door there since the wallpaper was plastered flushed against the door jam and even the hinges.

She waltzed through the non existent lobby almost toppling the half dead plant and almost tripped herself up on an old motel phone - you know the type - the very same ones in old movies; Beige, thick and with those huge square buttons.

When she turned the key to welcome me, language came out, but none that I could decipher. It was a cross between Jawa speak (the critters on Luke Skywalker's home planet) and gibberish. But I was assuming it was "welcome... come on in"... so I did.

As soon as she made her way back through the mystery door a small Buddah-like fellow with round specks joined her behind what I'm hgoing to generously refer to as the registration desk... though it was devoid of anything remotely found on such a station. In fact the entire place looked totally devoid of life.

Hmmm, I pressed on to inquire about the special of 28 bucks. "Sirty" said the rolly man and followed it with "Sirty, sren sru gif key back sre gif sru two dol a back!" Huh?

The old man grabbed two dollars and a key and demonstrated that in fact it was 28 but I needed to leave 2 extra for key deposit. The place began to slowly grow on me,

though i had little idea what we were saying to each other. The next 5 minutes was spent on them yapping and me looking puzzled. I'll spare u the details but it turned out their credit card machine was out, there was no phone in the room, and check out was eleven. I learned all this through a trial and error charades game that ended in me just smiling and handing over money.

This place was raw. A dying breed. No. Check that. The place was dead. I think myself and one other person were renting for the night. It was one of these places where you needent check for bed bugs. Trust me, they were there. I just happen to be the type that really doenst care. Besides that 20/20 special found them in some of the top hotels in the world!

I've stayed in hiker shelters on the Appalachian Trail with mice crawling over me trying to eat my granola bars at 3am... this was heaven!

But i will continue with an overview;

The room was straight out of the 60's. Horrid rug pattern of orange and blue. Two TV sets, one working one not. One hanging off the wall. The other plopped on a formica desk that could barely hold its weight.

The bed was a king. The sheets so thin and warn i bet i could se through them. The night stand had absolutely nothing on it or in it. Nothing. Not a bible. Not a clock. Not a phone. Not even an ash tray, though i'm sure this was a smoking room.

The bathroom looked reminiscent of the scene where Pacino almost gets cut up by a chainsaw in scarface. No tile just cut up plastic with wooden boards showing through. The towels. Actually "Towel" (singular) was well a poor excuse for a towel. And its accompanying wash cloth looked more like a dish rag.

It wasnt the Days Inn of the day before. But guess what? It was home for the night. It was warm. It had cable. And soft pillows (3). And i was on the road and loving it. I turned on MTV to find the pre show to the Grammys which i then vegged out for 4 more hours on CBS watching the rest of the braodcast!

In the morning i began walking towards Crofton, KY my next goal - about a 10 mile jaunt. Along the way i witnessed an awesome sight in the category a Hitchcock-like moment. A cross between a National Geographic documentary and a horror flick.

As i rounded the top of a mini hill i could see a large farm become engulfed by thousands of black birds, swooping and covering the dried out crops with a plague of wings, bills and noise.

It was an ominous sight, and from my vantage point i was able to watch them slowly move across the fields, take off and land again. Each time the entire phenomenon looking like an etcho-sketch being redrawn and erased.

Again the farmlands and farms and barns surrounded me and a new doggie that i named one eyed pete (he had one white eye and the other was sorta shut) followed me for about 2 miles. I was worried he'd never find his way back, though i tried to shoo him back on many ocassions. Luckily a group of dogs countered him, growled and sent one eyed pete running back home - all the while diverting their nasty demeanor away from me. Thanks Pete!

I ate lunch at a Baptist Church stoop, perched perfectly on the side of the church where the sun was bearing down. So for a moment, until the clouds covered again, i was roasting quite nicely enjoyng some light snacks.

The clouds today were battle-ship in appearance. Big, beautiful and everywhere. Though blue sky and luckily the sun showed for most of the day. It wasnt raining and by now all the snaow from last night had melted.

But it was cold and by the time i got to Crofton and picked up my drop box with the

food and tent and sleeping bag for the next section...i was gettin chilled.

Actually, the news had a field day with the snow-flurries, which many northerners just would laugh at. Northerners like Shanon who was kind enough to give me a lift back to Hopkinsville.

"I'm from Michigan, we get 5 feet there. Now that's snow. This stuff is for pansies. Look if it doesnt stick to the ground, it aint snow!"

Dont tell that to the nearly 20 counties that canceled school this day. I think they called it wrong. This was a beautiful day...even for a nice walk.

Cesar Becerra
Crofton, KY, (writing this at the Hopkinsville library)

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8 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - Day 3, Kentucky Crossing; Let it Flurry, Let it Flurry, Let it Furry!

No less than 15 minutes past my 11am check out time and into my walk today it began to flurry. Light snow/rain, dancing around landing gently on my reversable rain coat/winter jacket.

I turned it inside out real fast though and zipped up everything in my bag, made sure it was waterproofed and just continued on ahead. Oddly enough it was rather balmy, not as cold as what it looked like. I guess when u think snow is falling you say to yurself "its gotta be cold"...but it wasn't...not till later.

Once again i passed under Highway 24, this time for the last time i would see it. I've been practically following along side it on small roads since Chattanooga...many moons ago!

Todays section was a typical "leaving one small town, crossing to another"...with alot of space in between. Only i've been noticing that these rural spaces that generally are acres of green fields are in fact prime development lands.

The double edge sword of a tough farm economy and lots of space are making these once pastoral scenes almost extinct. Normally i'll go several miles from one development to the next. But today i couldn't go more than a half a mile before butting into the next.

One was a place called Novalan. A massive golf course community being carved out of an old farmstead. The developers have tried to keep the character of the place with a cheap plastic farm fencing that from the road looks great, but upon closer inspection (i walked right next to it to take on the high ground and get away from the edge of the road) reeks of cheepness.

I plain hate plastic fencing. Who came up with this stuff. I'm ok with the recycled plastic lumber, but this white pressed stuff is hideous! What gets me the most is how pretentious it is. Its all there for show. It certainly wont hold anything out or in. You can take the stuff apart with yur bare hands. The three tierd slats are easy enough to squeeze an elephant thru!

With a deep burm (gully) not allowing any car to get through, then what practical purpose does it play? Well i'll tell ya.

Now that there just basically is no farmland, we have to resort to a simulation of a farm look. Thus the fancy but fake fencing that conjures up another time. But ruining the scenery are these oversized McMansions with there complicated roof styles, four car garages and fake bricks!

My disdain for these developments is clear. What i cant figure out is how people can afford them. These are not yur middle class suburbs. These are mega mansions, but it is obvious that it is not for the mega rick, for once again giving off the tel-tale sign that they are up-in-comers is the fact that despite the large spread, they are built right up against one another.

In any case. As i walm i like to give myself certain far off items to reach so as to compartmentalize the day's journey. This could be a pole, a parked car, a barn or a sign. Today it was signs.

Genuinely they read; "So and so Farms" or "U-Pic Vegetables" but today each one i got to was a developers sign. One was an upcoming mega movie palace, another a future development selling "lots and houses" and yet another a future Honda Dealership.

Folks, enjoy the wide open spaces while u can, they are going fast!

Mid way through my journey today the flurries got worse and the wind picked up. i took evasive measures and tucked everything in and pulled out then put on yet a third layer of leggings. This time my rain pants. But it was not precipitation enough to bring out the poncho.

At this point i also got out a second larger neck and face band that really covers me to the point that all yu can see are my eyeglasses peeking out. I felt like Darth Vader, breathing heavy and at just the right angle through my mouth so that the heat would not fog out my glasses.

Course this is impossible sometimes and my glasses fog up anyway. Its a messy experience. That, the building sweat from being covered in basically reran wrap (rain gear) and having to walk wearing 3 pants! But make no mistake, these are the moments i feel i'm having a grand adventure.

As i pulled into Hopkinsville i discovered an amazing main street area straight out of the 1920's. Sure there was plenty of sprawl but the city redeemed itself with the care and celebration they have for their old brownstone, brick buildings.

I could see the old double hung windows, the old Rexall Drug sign (still operating) and the faint but touched up logos and signage along the sides of these brick masterpieces.

Today's motel wars were interesting. As i walked by The Kings Court Motel i was quoted 32 bucks, but it was only 3 and i wanted to do a few more miles. At the Manhattan, they were renovating so ...no dice. The Colonial said 30 but the Motel 7 won out at 28!

I'll check in later, right now i'm enjoying tapping away at this computer at the local library. Writing my blog, checking and zapping e-mails and surveying the beginning touches on the design of my new web-site by my graphics guy and great pal Jason (see www.planetcesar.com).

So progress is being made all around. Step by step, website by website and unfortunately farm field by farm field.

I'm hoping that by 11am tomorrow this system passes but if it doesnt it will just be another wet day....full of adventure, challenges and lots of sweat....even on a cold day!

Cesar Becerra
Hopkinsville, KY

PS. Remember everybody, the planetcesar.com site is still new so there will be changes to it i'm hoping to launch it by march.

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7 Feb 2006

Atlanta GA, United States - (READ ENTRY BELOW FIRST) Day 2 Kentucky crossing
(CONTINUED)

By the end of the 12th mile and over five hours of walking, it was time to narrow down my search for the hotel that I was to choose for the night. I had faxed the Days Inn, Holiday Inn, and Comfort Inn, all of which are in one clump next to Exit 86 on Hwy. 24. An hour before my arrival I called all three and let the bidding wars begin. All three were generous enough to extend a small discount, but Sylvia at the Days Inn won out at \$47.

By 4:00, one hour before the sun would set, I walked into the lobby and awaiting me were nice smiles by Sylvia and her sister Jessica, who actually later would attempt to notify the local newspaper of my presence in town. They even asked me to sign a brochure I had given them. Now I'm no rock star, mind you, but it always feels good to be welcomed out in the middle of nowhere, where you know next to nobody.

After getting my key and dumping all my stuff in the room, I vegged out and watched two movies back to back; one of my favorite things is to zone out with an incessant stream of pop culture TV watching. MTV happens to be my favorite. I, of course, disagree (and chuckle) with just about everything on there but it helps me understand the forces that are at play marketing products and image to youth and adults alike. Channel surfing between my favorite shows (Room Raiders, Pimp my Ride, and Cribs) is another great pasttime of mine, especially watching all the commercials, none of which ever seem to work their magic on me. It's funny, that of all the free time I do have in my life, I seldom watch TV on any other occasion than when I walk.

Tomorrow I head to Hopkinsville, the first real big town in Kentucky. Hopefully, the weather holds but I'll be ready for whatever comes my way.

Cesar Becerra
Oak Grove, Kentucky

P. S. : This particular entry is especially significant because it is the first "call-in" that I regurgitated in a phone call to my wonderful assistant Becky. Exciting to me, is the fact that many years ago in the 1930's veteran journalist Ernie Pyle (WWII correspondent) once drove around the U.S. calling in to the Scripps Newspaper Headquarters in Washington, D.C. his daily stories about life on the road. I am nowhere near as comfortable vocalizing my stories as Ernie once had to do, but I will get there. So, if this first one sounded a tad wooden, just know it was the first for me. CB

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7 Feb 2006

miami florida, United States - Day 2 Kentucky crossing; lost dogs, hotel wars, and a brisk breeze

I never noticed them before, but there they were--big, beautiful, and yellow--and bright as the sunlight that was peering into the tiny cabin, cabin #2 to be exact, at the Clarksville campground. It dawned on me as I opened the door to, by now, an overheated cabin that, in fact, I was in the sunflower cabin. Outside the door, etched in wood and colored in bright yellow and green was just that--a cute rendition of sunflowers.

Thus, was the start of my day as I headed out crunching across a field of harvested corn. My first step was to cross over Hwy. 24 and down onto a tiny town road which would lead me one more time into the State of Tennessee and back out north into Kentucky for good. Crossing major highways is always a highlight. It is here where I feel that I am making mega progress. As the semis, tourists, and other road trippers whiz by underneath me at speeds of 70 mph, I, on the other hand, inch along at turtle speed happy that I am moving at the opposite extreme.

I thought that today couldn't have been sunnier than yesterday but there it was, chasing me all day, a sun that glowed hot white, making the fields around me once again look like silver sheets of ribbon in patterns where the farm equipment had run across their uneven surfaces. Making it even brighter was the fact that there wasn't a cloud in the sky--it was blue all around me.

Most of the day I spent contemplating the three Amish families I saw the previous day. I also remember, on the way to Kentucky, being at the Nashville Greyhound Station where a small Amish family was about to board the bus. Looking closely at their clothes, I could see that even their jeans were handmade. Practically every stitch of clothing, including the thick black bonneted hats on the ladies, was handmade. It's funny to me that in a world so rich in logos and brands, there are people even more radical than I am about simplicity.

I remember the moment when one of the Amish buggies passed me by and a small child--about the age of ten--had been given the reins to the buggy. I remember his large eyes and the look of joy and excitement as he was, in fact, driving for the first time in his life. It all happened in a nano second, but it etched in my mind those moments in life when we grow from children into teenhood, and from teenhood to adulthood.

Today I had a considerably longer day of about 12 miles so I was out and walking by 11:00 am. Usually I do not start until 12:00 or even 1:00 because in winter I want to be sure to catch the height of the hottest part of the day. Some might find that rather lazy of me, but I am being careful with this winter journey. Today, in particular, I had quite a few layers of clothing on, more so than yesterday.

On top, I wore a T-shirt-style wicking (fabric that allows sweat to evaporate quickly into the air and not into the fibers of the fabric, i.e. cotton) polyester shirt and no less than two polyester longsleeved turtleneck-type shirts. On top of that, my reversible jacket/raincoat. Below, I had two layers of pants, one was spandex-like exercise pants, and over that my regular convertible cargo hiking pants. Gloves and hat and scarf finished the deal, making me look as if I was a quasi Michelin man of about 30 lbs. heavier than my actual weight. Though I was sweating quite a bit, it felt good that I was cutting off the brisk cold air that was whipping at me just about all day.

Again, I walked by dozens of farmhouses, red barns, and silhouetted leafless trees making the entire horizon look like a Grandma Moses painting. This happens to be my favorite surroundings because, where I grew up in the big city of Miami, farmland was just not a reality.

I remember going each year to the youth fair just to see the cows which, I thought, were trucked in special for this event. I naively also thought the cows lived in the very pens that I pet them in. Today, however, I know better and I walk by hundreds, if not thousands, of cows each day on both the right and left side of just about any road. There are times when I will inch up, as I did today, against the fences and certain varieties of cows (I have no idea which variety) come towards me and allow me to pet them and be licked by them. Their incredible power and weight adds to the scary moment when they all come to a halt and I actually feel the ground vibrate.

After I compose myself, I reach through the barbed wire and they begin to smell me with their wet noses and, if they feel comfortable, they actually touch me with their hard sandpaper-like tongue. It is a moment I cherish each time. After it is over and I walk away, they generally follow me for the entire length of the field, and just before I leave them, I look back and say "bye girls".

Towards the end of my walk today I had another dog encounter. These are moments that are filled with a little intrepidation because I never know if the dog is going to be vicious or simply curious. I never waver from the side of the road I am walking on because I have learned that it actually makes them more nervous. When they come at me hard, running at full gallop and barking, I usually take off my backpack and brace for what I think could be an attack, but always ends up being a love fest, the

vicious little beast turning into a soft cuddly puppy no matter what size or breed.

On this occasion it was a beautiful brown boxer. I instantly named him Brownie. Brownie initially was protecting a small trailer home but as he had no collar, I had serious doubt that he lived there. What was clear early on was that Brownie wanted to walk with me, and he did so for close to a mile, even though on several occasions I tried to shoo him away. This happens quite a bit and on occasions I will walk the dog to the nearest home or convenience store and ask the residents to look out for my newfound follower.

On this occasion, though, it was a family that met the dog just before I got to the Wal-Mart in Oak Grove. I was pretty sure it was a military family because just about the entire town is inundated with families, businesses, and other institutions that owe their existence to this massive military base. Sure enough, as they walked away with Brownie, I noticed that they lived in a sprawling apartment complex with just about every car sporting either army or marine logos on the back window or rear bumper.

It's a tough time (I can assume) to be in the military. Almost every car in Oak Grove that passed me along the road had the popular six-inch yellow metallic ribbon that adheres to any part of a car. Some actually had 2 to 3 yellow ribbons and almost every newspaper bin sported a local story about both the base and the soldiers who either had come back from Iraq, or sadly had not.

Two days prior, I had met two Iraq veterans who were returning to civilian life in Tenn. They had recounted their tales of being "detoxed" into normal life. One of them told me that the workshop consisted of understanding the difference between a small altercation or a nasty glance that, to normal people might seem like an annoyance, but to a returning soldier could be similar to waving a red flag in front of a bull. The younger of the two soldiers was very explicit in telling me how hard it is to keep their cool because, as he clearly said "we are trained to kill and we have been killing for eight months now, so it is sometimes hard to turn off that switch". As I passed the base, I heard the whirl of the choppers and I could see in the distance a convoy of humvees, and then it dawned on me how fine the line is between one world and another.

(continued above)

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6 Feb 2006

miami florida, United States - First Steps Out; Leaving Guthrie headed west. I knew i packed too much. Damn. 16.9 pounds, really mostly clothes and i step out onto the road and in no less than 15 minutes i'm practically dying of heat.

Off go the gloves, unzip the jacket to let some cold air in. Even my hat for a while i ditch, bare face against a vicious wind that was only in my imagination.

A beautiful, sunny day. Clear skies is what awaited me in Clarksville, TN after nearly 4 hours of travel on bus under skies that looked ominous. Clous that made me doubt whether i should have rescheduled this section for a warmer time.

But as i always said; "Every day is a great weather day!"

The walk itself began at thta old pink elephant that no one seems to know how it got there. Next to it at another convenience (as i was shuttled by taxi from Clarksville) store i noticed a giant plexiglass cow!

What is it with these giant animals? A kentucky tradition, i dont know. but the real animals were present along every stretch i walked through today as rolling fields of cut cotton, corn and tobacco glistened like a sheet of silk for miles in each direction.

On three occasions I saw three separate mirages in the form of Amish buggies, clopping along the highway slowly. Two of them passed right by me and it was like time had stood still.

Black-hooded zorros bundled up holding reins behind powerful bronzed horses. Their grey boxes perched on shaky wheels. What a scene. Only one of the three buggies waived at me. I think either they were shy, afraid or freaked out and jealous someone was moving slower than them!

I realized that there was a "medium" speed. Before that I thought the carss that whizzed by me was one speed out on the walk. That of "lightening speed" and me the turtle, representing "slow as mollasses". But now I see that there is another and I certainly will see more as I continue west.

Later that day an incredible display of swirling wind practically kissed me near a beautiful farm. I watched as it danced across the field. Leaves swirling counter-clockwise, cone shaped and God's gift of power.

The day ended eight miles later at The Clarksville RV Park (www.clarksvillervpark.com) when I arrived to plop down inside a warm cabin for the night. After a 3 hour nap, I stepped outside to head to write this missive and noticed the temperature had dropped considerably so I was happy as hell to find this oasis in the middle of nowhere.

Cesar Becerra
Clarksville, TN

5 Feb 2006

miami florida, United States - World Walk Eve; Last day of prep, tomorrow (if all goes well) I'll be back on the walk.

Well after a long day of debating with myself, I decided on a halfway point on the whole to tent or not to tent issue. And I decided on a half way settlement. I will send the tent along for my 5th day of this section to a town called Crofton.

Most people don't know that you can actually mail yourself something to just about any town in America if you just know the zip code and send it to yourself in care of general mail delivery and mail it away. The US postal service will hold onto that package for 4 weeks.

In the long distance hiking community we call this a drop box. Basically shipping supplies ahead of your route and picking them up when you get there. I have some special meals that are low in calories so I can't get them just anywhere, so those are being sent along.

See some towns are so small the local convenience store (yes sometimes there is not even a grocery store) just stocks up on cheetos and candy bars. I'm kidding but you get my drift. Since I am on a low salt diet now, I try and stay away from eating anything related to the junk food category.

So away went ten pounds of tent, tent poles, sleeping bag and food. That is ten pounds less that I have to carry for 5 days. Remember, hike smarter not harder.

Packed my bag with more than enough winter gear, though I'm sure I won't use much of it, and with 4 f=days of food, water and clothing I'm at 11 pounds, maybe 12 once my toiletries and paperwork get slipped in.

Wrote some letters today to some postmasters along the way in the remote sections of the walk as I journey up hwy 41. Just told them that there are little services and if there is anything they can do to help me out that would be a blessing. Not needed but a blessing.

Also mailed out some other letters to motels along the way in the hopes that some

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might shave off a couple of bucks or donate a night stay for the walk. Three of which i faxed because i will be in the Oak Grove area by tuesday night so i did not have enough "mail" time for them to get there in time.

I can afford the hotel stays, but for the health of the trip, the more money i can save, the longer i can walk without having to take too much time off to replenish the piggy bank.

Becky and Bill surprised me with some goodies today made up of yogurt dipped pretzels, unsalted peanuts, cashews, carobs, chex and mint chocolates. This will make for a great snack each day. I sent half along ahead in the drop box so i dont wolf it down in the first 5 days.

So all that is left tomorrow is to drop me off at the Greyhound Station and i'm off to north Tennessee and the kentucky border. After depositing me at the bus station Becky will mail out the drop box and letters and the stage will be set for my kentucky crossing.

Watched a bit of the halftime show where the Rolling Stones brought back some respectability (i guess) to America's most beloved 15 minutes. Mick started with "You start me up" and on down the line the lyrics rang "i'll never stop"....thought of my walk and the joy in resuming it and how it is an ongoing piece of me now.

NO matter how long the breaks, i keep coming back, each step a little closer to my goal.

Stay tuned...

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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4 Feb 2006

miami florida, United States - Preparations hit the net, the phone and a giant state atlas!

On with the planning, i woke up today refreshed and ready to begin logistics plans with the state atlas i bought yesterday at Barnes and Noble. It dawned on me early that the route i was to take through Kentucky only consisted of five of the 89 page atlas which i paid 21 bucks for.

Screw that, i went to Office Depot, copied 5 pages for 35 cents and returned the atlas unused. Hey, i figure with the amout of hotel stays coming up, i'm gonna save as much money as i can.

OK, so here is how i plan the walk. I look at the atlas carefully and see which is the best route from mid size town to mid size town. In between there are plenty of small/mini towns (some of them just turns in the road). These are important because during this late winter section of the walk, i will be relying on convenience stores and motels to keep me warm, and have the ability to have warm food in me.

Pretty much i will be following route 41 (once i walk to it from 20 miles east of where it hits the small community of oak Grove, Kentucky.

Though i'm primarily planning on staying in motels each night, i am still debating wether to take my tent or not - just in case. The difficult gamble comes 4 days into the trip where i venture north of Hopkinsville, KY where there is a 55 mile section with no hotels.

My logistical plan is to call a taxi from small town convenience stores and have them shuttle me back and forth as i complete each days walk. In other words, walk 15 or 20 miles on one day north from Hopkinsville then get picked up, taken back to Hopkinsville, stay the nigt in a motel and next day be taken back out where i left

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off and walk north again till i get close to - or halfway from - Madisonville. Then repeat. call taxi from convenience store. Get picked up, taken to Madisonville, stay in motel. next day get driven back to place i left off and walk on into Madisonville.

Following this. If not check out this map on mapquest;

<http://www.mapquest.com/directions/main.adp?do=nw&go=1&1a=&1c=Oak%20Grove&1s=KY&1z=&1n=Christi an&1y=US&1l=XYwV9Pcl 6Xc%3d&1g=LAmDCoUkWj s%3d&1v=CI TY&2a=&2c=Evansvi l l e&2s=I N&2z=&2y=US&2l=q00sAUF0ei s%3d&2g=2oBsC5grx8w%3d&2pn=&2pl =&2v=CI TY&2ffi =&2e x=&2n=Vanderburgh>

Now again, this might sound like a pain, and i certainly can and have camped out in weather like this. But if i can afford not to, i wnt. Remember, my philosophy is called "Thorough Hiking" which is a slower, lighter, more inquisitive way to journey...and its mantra is hike smarter, not harder!

So i will try for now to stay in out of the cold by day's end. But just in case, i am seriously considering taking the extra three pounds that is the tent, tent ploes and sleeping bag. But for the record, i'm not happy about it. But another side of me realizes that since its winter still, i will have most of my clothing on me, so the packw ill be pretty light anyhow.

I prefer the hike with a ten pound pack, but in winter it will probably be 15 pounds. to some of u that might come off as ridiculously wimp-like, but to me, its just enough. I'm not out to be a hero, or some macho hiker...just a worldwalker that prefers to enjoy the journey...and the less on my back the better i can concentrate on the scenery.

OK. So onto the next step. Calling folks from taxis to hotels. Today i basically took care of the first three/four days of what i think will be a 8 to 9 or 10 day stretch of about 110 miles.

On day one, i will arrive via Greyhound in Clarksville, TN and hire a taxi to take me to Guthrie if in case my friend Pat (from Couch Surfing) doesnt call me back. I have called two taxi companies - a rarity in a small town - and one beat out the other with a quote of 35 bucks as opposed to 50.

Mission accomplished. So a 40 dollar Greyhound ticket from Chattanooga to Clarksville and a 35 dollar taxi ride to Guthrie, will bring me back to the worldwalk route that i left off at just before Thanksgiving.

You can see now, that part of my love for the walk consist of figuring out the logistics. On day one i will walk about 8 miles to where a small road intersects Hwy 24, exit #1 and just by chance, thanks to a compani on book on interstates called "The Next Exit", i found out there is a campground at Exit 1. When i looked it up on-line, isaw that they had heated cabins for 35 bucks! I called them and reserved one.

Bingo, day one, done. Next day i will walk to Oak Grove. taht is a 15 mile section and get a hotel room where Hwy 41 intersects Interstate 24. My trusty "The Next Exit" guide lists 3 hotels there so no problem.

Next day would be Oak Grove to Hopkinsville. Lookin like 15 or 16 miles. And so on.

Tomorrow i will continue to work on the rest as well as pack my bag as early as possible so i can enjoy the Super Bowl Game with Bill and Becky.

Packing is an art. A pain too. I'm such a persnickety light weight jedi that it takes me forever. You'll here that tale tomorrow.

Goodni ght

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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3 Feb 2006

miami florida, United States - Turning on a dime; Returning to the Worldwalk. Well it will be interesting finally to have u all on board in witnessing the behind the scenes of what it takes to re-start the Worldwalk.

Just before Thanksgiving of 2005, i had finished a 150 mile section from Monteagle, TN to Guthrie, Kentucky and decided to break for both the holidays and to take a bit of the winter sting off of walking in December and January.

Not that it will be sunny and 70 degrees (actually they are calling for some chilly temps) but i decided two days ago to change my travel plans of chilling out another month and resuming the trip.

I do this alot. It drives most folks insane cuz they can never tell where i'm gonna be at or when i will make a decision to go. A typical exchange will be as follows. "So when ya heading out?" and i will answer "Oh, i dont know." then they will say, "so when ya gonna know or decide?" and i'll retort; "I'll decide tomorrow."

Turning on a dime and deciding to take on a job, visit a new city, play, or go back to the walk...is the luxury i have that most folks dont. I'm not rubbing it in, its just a fact. I'm not rich, but i live life so simply that i can.

So one second i was in Atlanta about to head to visit friends in Boston and DC and New York, but one of them had to had surgery so the universe was telling me now is not the right time to go. Besides another voice was telling me to get back to the walk. Its an itch really. And i never know where its gonna bite.

It is always exciting to get back on the walk. I do it in sections because as much as i like to walk and be visiting small towns, see the American landscape...i also believe it comes in stages and do one thing too long and it can get to ya. So i head full throttle into my other worlds until the road calls.

And the road is calling.

Course its easier said than done to just get back out. I was picked up near a giant pink Elephant next to a convenience store in a remote section of Kentucky near a little town called Guthrie.

You will not only be privy (i have never written my blog while i was walking since i put this blog together) to how i get back there but the preparation of the equipment, food, gear and logistics as i slowly head back to Guthrie.

My goal is to walk 100 miles through Kentucky till i enter the state of Illinois bringing me to the hard left i have been chasing now for two years. That hard left begins my trajectory to St Lois and beyond and i will stay pretty due west till i hit the Pacific Ocean.

The first step was to get to my stuff and have a few days at the worldwalk office to work on the logistics (mapping/route). That part was easy. but again i take for granted how flexible i can be.

My pal marji took me to the Greyhound Station in Atlanta, i got a ticket, called Becky and Bill in Chattanooga and told them when i'd arrive. Two and a half hours later, Bill picked me up, we had dinner at our favorite "Souper Salad" and across the street i bought a 20 dollar Kentucky State Atlas.

The rest is a little trickier; the actual decision of how to walk, where to walk, researching what towns have conveniences, libraries, accomodations etc...

Then off course what to pack; not too much, not too little (from clothes to food to rain/winter gear to even if i take my mini digital video camera)...and the newest wrinkle; how to get the story out to you all.

Stay tuned, tomorrow i'll begin to explain it all.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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1 Feb 2006

miami florida, United States - "Man! - I feel like a woman!"; I experience the price (and pain) of looking good.

Machine gun fire is what it sounds like. An undecipherable language yapping at a hundred miles an hour. Only no one gets killed and u don't have to duck.

A small army of Vietnamese mothers, mothers to be, aunts and sisters man the gun stations of a multitude of ramped up Lazy Boy chairs on acid! These stations, which u have to climb up into are equipped with 4 level massage control for back and bottom, small Jacuzzi for the feet and mini hand microwaves (oven mits attached to an electric cord!). The fact that there is a pool of water at your feet is far from comforting. I set the massage chair on high and tried desperately to forget I was three feet away from electrocution.

Welcome to "One Nails" on Ashford Dunwoody Road, the epicenter of cuticle culture and the pampered zone of an industry that many women (and some men) find at times irresistible and other times part of the price of being beautiful. It is here that my friend Marji (remember Marji, queen of the Loft World - or at least future Queen) convinced me to explore as she treated me to my first ever pedicure and manicure.

Hey I figure since I made a split second decision to get back to walking next week, I might as well get the ole clogs cleaned up and ready for some wear and tear. Actually, I just have always wanted to get a window into this secret world that most men have no idea about.

First step, pick some colors. Marji was thinking red, I recommended some deep purple thingie called Dusk. Other candidates on a wall with nearly 300 nail color bottles included "Hue and Me Too", "Little Boy Red", "Burnt Umber" and "Chai-Surprize". Dusk won out cuz I've convinced Marji, who was heading out on a craigslist date later that evening (which I also inspired her to post) to ramp up her hip-hop appeal now that she is living in the urban jungle next to a rail yard!

Hopping onto the high lazy boys, one feels like a king or queen. The effect taking even more hold as the vertically challenged Vietnamese artisans begin scrubbing your feet, pushing back cuticles and detailing them with scissors, sponges, files and lotions and soap of all kinds.

A towel gingerly gets patted down on each surface of yur foot as soon as each maneuver is completed. All that is left to complete the ruse, would be some grape feeding and a faint breeze from peacock feathers - all of which would be accomplished by a small monkey in a red velvet suit! But alas this is Dunwoody not Rome of a thousand years back!

Around the room I saw teens, pre teens and their mom's enjoying a rite of passage I guess in the continual upkeep of the modern woman's sex appeal. God knows how much this ritual brings in in the grand scheme of the even bigger industry that keeps us looking pretty! But it hit me like a ton of bricks when, modern-looking Marji, confessed that her first manicure wasn't until her mid thirties!

Have we substituted vanity for substance in this race for perfection? What exactly does having nice nails signify? Success, beauty, leisure, class? Is the price

(Marjis was 42 bucks, mine was 32 bucks) worth it? And what does it all get you in return?

Hmmm. After the pedicure my chilled but tingly feeling feet moved over to a sitting station manned by the pregnant wife of the salon owner. Tracy said, "Yu sit. You want brouse and nails done?" I looked puzzled over at Marji, now an army surrounding her simultaneously working on her hands and feet. "Go ahead, have your eyebrows done!"

Huh. Oh brouse was eye brows! Um, I guess as I nodded before thinking twice about the associated pain that comes from tweezers and hot wax. But before I could back off a small cauldron of hot gluey mustard stuff was in front of me and Tracy had tilted my head back. With a little wooden spoon she brushed this warm goo in between my eyes. A small piece of cloth seemed to have come from nowhere and in about 5 seconds –although I did not know it – I would be at the local planetarium seeing stars.

OHFFF, BABY! (Fuuuck, I thought!) As she pulled away with a grip seen only on the WWF, the pain flowed in. I would have easily switch positions with that carpenter who had the three four inch nails driven into his skull by a pneumatic gun gone mad! But before I could faint – and believe u me, I wanted to – Tracy put her finger over the now hairless area in between my now separated brows. I never really came to grips with the fact that I had some sort of a monobrow but everyone agreed it was definitely there.

As I recovered I asked Robin a long time customer and local nutritionist what she thought of the whole regimen. "Well its interesting, my husband is a foot guy, and a few days ago he looked at me and said 'honey, I think its time for a pedicure' so here I am!" Later Robin added that it is her opinion that more men should have pedi/mani – cures, to which I asked if she consequently made her husband come in for an appointment. Surprisingly she added "Actually my husband said that hell would have had to freeze before he came in!"

Too bad, Robin's husband doesn't know what he's missing. Feet and hands done and a new sculptured brow, I waltzed out of there feeling like a new woman, er, um, I mean a new man!

Cesar Becerra
Dunwoody - Atlanta, GA

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31 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Foreign Safety; A new friend travels a long way to snap photos.

Subject" "Trees", Speed: "250", F-Stop: "2.5".... Click!

Thus was the methodical entries on a tiny spiral bound notebook as new friend and fellow Couch Surf member "Penny" stood in the middle of an intersection gathering a series of 5 shots each on a list of subjects for her Introduction to Photography class.

It would be too easy to label her a "foreign exchange student"...ala "Fez" on the popular series "That 70's Show". To call Penny a foreign exchange student would be like soaking a roll of tissue paper in India ink. This story has major grey areas!

First, Penny is living in a home bought by her parents in the Dunwoody area of North Atlanta. She and her brother are living and working in Atlanta as they both pursue their studies. Penny is enrolled in classes at The Atlanta School of the Arts.

It is there I met her at The Arts Center Metro (Marta-above ground subway) Station adjacent to the art school to help her complete a class project in Photography. My role was simple ..."please watch for traffic so I do not get run over and write down

what I tell you"...Penny said in a light English/Spanish accent, one that teeters quite unnoticeably in between the two worlds she exists in.

A row of knarly trees, denuded of any vegetation caught her eye on a curved street corner. Once Penny transferred the security details to me, she obliviously went to work, snapping, changing speeds, aperture and yelling out the details as I watched for cars nervously trying to jot down the details.

Now Atlanta is not a cheap city to live, rent or just get by in. As I watched her go to work, I began doing the math. In my head I said to myself; "they are students living in a home their parents own, but parents are in Mexico City?" Hmmm, someone must be quite wealthy.

Its hard not to stereotype but the reality is that I seldom – nope make that never – hear of any Mexican foreign exchange students in the USA. I mean I am certain they are here but you don't bump into them all the time. So Penny must derive from a wealthy family? Diplomats or aristocrats of some kind? I had to ask, and there was no gingerly way to put it.

"So are ur parents rich?" I said with an uncomfortable wince. Penny saw this coming and began to explain the odd reality that exists in Mexico but in particular the watch-your-step-capital-of crime that is Mexico City. "See we are not poor but not rich." That broad stroke left me even more puzzled. "But we are not rich enough to afford body guards." At that point I began connecting the dots and remembered the Denzel Washington/Dakota Fanning movie about the dangerous issue of kidnapping.

So in the end the reality that hit me is that Penny had been sent to The United States to study simply for the fact that she was not safe from harm in Mexico City. Here, she is safe, feels safe, and in comparison Penny laughs at issues that u an I might find disturbing. For example one day her car was broken into and they stole a cheap stereo on another she couldn't get over the fact that at here new high school years ago the lockers had no locks on them. "In Mexico City there are bars everywhere. Crime is evident each day. I feel very at ease here."

On a 20 minute Marta ride Penny explained to me that she was originally a theatre maven in Mexico City. Her move to the United States and the trouble she went through acclimating herself to the language left her uninspired and unable to participate. She lost interest in Drama and picked up art.

Whatever she intends to do, she certainly will accomplish it with much more peace of mind here than in Mexico City. Its certainly sad that her family has to ship her off so far away just to provide for her safety but then again she will be enriched by living and experiencing a new culture and exploring a new reality. But someday she will return. Turns out only kids of a certain age are targets. Parents and older young adult siblings are not as vulnerable.

As the Marta Station came in to view, I bid farewell to my new friend and silently gave thanks for my calm, quiet and safe childhood years.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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30 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Moving On; Stuff dealt with, heading out from Chattanooga on last month off from winter break.

Well the bags are packed, a big duffel bag – army style – is ready for a month long adventure that will signify my last days off before getting back to the worldwalk in the first week in March.

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Part pleasure part business trips, stops include Atlanta, DC, New York, Boston, Philly and Miami. Along the way – as I travel by car (a boatload of friends), bus (Greyhound), plane (my favorite, Southwest Airlines), commuter train of all kinds (Marta in Atlanta, The T in Boston, DC's Metro and New York's Subway), and of course by foot, I'll be taking care of a lot of business.

There will be meetings with lawyers (I was a key expert witness in a landmark Everglades Environmental lawsuit and the "other side" after settling the case wants to buy out the evidence I collected), there will be future business pitches (a big moving/estate/downsizing job is brewing in Atlanta), there will be special tours (in Miami an Everglades Adventure), there will be speculating real estate (loft ventures in downtown Philly) and catching up of all kinds along the way with friends.

And you will be there, so hang tight and if a few days here and there I don't get to post an entry just know its not that nothing is happening, its that too much is happening and I might be away from a computer.

As for what I leave in my wake here in Chattanooga is good times, lots of productivity, 9 empty boxes (that's right I downsized from 12 that arrived here to 3 that are left and one shelf of envelopes, letterheads and a few articles.

Boy that felt good. And I could not have done it without Becky and Bill who were amazing. We had such a good time each day and night on my off time (from being a basement dweller) walking, cooking, touring Chattanooga, watching some of my videos, etc...I will miss them, but will return in march to get my backpack and finalize logistics for the next 150 miles of the walk.

Off to Atlanta to catch my bus to Boston in a few hours.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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29 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Conclusion of Club "Cowboys" assesment. part 2
Continued from Jan 28th

I remembered earlier in the night hopping into Nathan's car and being blown away (literally cuz his speaker system was living in my ear drums) by the fact that he was blasting a reggaeton (pronounced reggae-tone, which is the mixing of hip hop and salsa, once thought two diabolically different forms of music) hit by popular cross over rapper Daddy Yankee. If you saw Nathan on the street, you'd think he was the last person to be interested in Daddy Yankee. Maybe I should get over this and just accept that everybody is openminded, but it still shocks me when someone of one outlook embraces another. I mean I honor it, but it still freaks me out!

So I believe strongly that the lines have melted at least in Chattanooga, TN. It is a breath of fresh air to see everybody just accept all for who they are. Furthermore enjoy music that when I grew up and got introduced to (hip hop) particularly is now being enjoyed by a diverse group not just in race or cultural background but in age as well. Which brings me to the next thing I bumped into at Cowboys that was an eye opener; the obliteration of generational gaps. Now my assessment is with women, so I cant speak about men yet cuz I did not interview any yet.

First, lets introduce the cast of ladies I met, danced with and some that I interviewed; first there was Becky, a mousy bespectacled Chattanooga who could move as well as any Miami-club-maven-minx, Betty, equally the same, but extremely naughty and overtly sexual in her demeanor (this comes into our story later, so I thought I'd mention this here) and her kinda shy friend Vanessa who almost didn't dance with me because she thought "you are just too good a dancer and I can barely move". All these younger girls had model-type bodies and their ages ranged from 21 to 25.

In the other corner you have three, more mature women (I hate the moniker of "older" – in many respects these ladies were much younger than the others). There was Cindy and Deb from Dalton, GA who are so dedicated to dancing at Cowboys, I saw them both nights...and Dalton is a ways away from Chattanooga. Then there was Nadine from Cleveland, TN who actually worked with two of the above mentioned ladies (this is significant to our story so follow along). This group of women ranged in ages of 46 to 51, but looked acted much younger than their actual ages.

The only thing they all had in common is that they loved to dance. Enjoy it and all have little or no fear to dance with whomever. I of course like that too. There are far too many times that women, at clubs especially have a stuck up attitude while on the dance floor. I'm there to have fun, I'm there to dance, so if u give me attitude, too bad, I'm not gonna even waist time dancing with ya. I generally stick with the ones that see it as a moment to express, to jam, to just feel the beat and loose yourself.

As far as their differences...well that's unfortunately night and day. But the rub, and yes there was even some "drama in da club" is that one group – the young ones has a real problem it seems with accepting that in this day and age some of their very competition lays with older women.

I stumbled on this inadvertently while I casually walked over where Betty and Vanessa (remember the two younger ladies) were hanging with their older friend and colleague Nadine in a group next to the dance floor siding. All I did was give Nadine a compliment on how spirited her dancing was. I always give props to those I think are really dynamic on the dance floor. I don't discriminate, I do so to the guys too, as many people (men and women) comment on my unique style...a feeling that really is quite nice.

So anyway, no less than 10 minutes later, as I was dancing with Nadine, young, smokin- body-Betty came over whispered something to Nadine and took off. I though nothing of it so kept dancing. Later, when I had a conversation with Nadine, she explained that the two ditched her and went to another club. This will sound petty and maybe its not fair to make a blanket assessment since I am sure there are plenty of open minded young women...but as Nadine tells it, "they couldn't handle the fact that I had complimented an older woman's dance style over theirs, especially Betty".

It is true, Betty and I danced pretty damn seductively. But it was all in fun. We were performing artists acting out "My Humps" or "Checkin on it". We had a captivated audience cheering us on. I certainly complimented her on her moves, but I guess the difference was that I didn't do so in front of her friends. And me dancing with the older co-worker Nadine was just too much. What did sexy Betty want me to do, marry her? We're just dancing!

Nadine went on to echo even a sentiment that I heard later from Deb. "I always have this problem when I go out with younger friends, somehow they can't handle that I can move just as well as they can and even attract the attention of younger men" I personally suck at figuring out how old people really are, making matters worse is that older women are dressing just the same as their younger cohorts..."thank you very much!"

On each occasion...and the ladies were very courageous about this...when I asked them to tell me their real ages (but not before I tried to guess) I realized I was targeting them way younger by 6 to 10 years. Deb is just the funnest person you can hang around, and the most open-minded, she has a 17 year old daughter that thinks she is cool, had dated Black, White, Indian..you name it in the nationality column. Cindy is this cute blond that sports a nose and belly piercing that was wearing a Beyonce-styled short camouflaged vest, tight jeans and kickin Cowboy boots the first night and the second night sported something I thought only my 22 year old sister and her friends can get away with wearing.

I asked Deb why she thought the generational lines have disappeared? Why one generation is now partying with kids that can literally be...well...their kids? He

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answer was fascinating; "The era I grew up in had rigid rules of what proper behavior should be. By the time I came out of my 15 year marriage I realized I had closed off and in many cases never tasted the joys of life, so when I was free again, I made a pact with myself to go out and join the world I missed...and that meant experiencing the life of folks 15 years younger than me!"

I got a phone call recently from a friend who came off a date with a man that was basically her same age - lets say 50. On my voice mail she expressed reservation that although the date was fun and interesting "I think I oddly enough prefer younger guys...i mean how many times do I have to listen to Elton John before I pull my hair out." I know her well cuz I've seen her jam to Outkast and bumps modern R&B on her Satellite Radio while driving like a crazed teen.

Nadine capped it off saying; "I guess they (the younger ones) are threatened by our personalities, cuz its obvious we cant compete in the body dept. but its sad that it has happened on each occasion I go out with younger gals from work." I agreed with Nadine on the personality issue but I told her to look for more open minded friends...and there are plenty..even younger ones.

So 40-ish is the new 20 and 50 the new 30. Older women are lookin younger cuz they are rockin the outfits, dance with the young guys cuz their confidence is through the roof and society (narrow-minded young girls excluded) has now embraced the reality that age is less of an issue that ever. Think Ashton and Demi and the entire cast of Desperate Housewives! It's a free-for-all.... young girls beware.... the hot mommas are bearing down on your territory, so stop pulling temper tantrums and accept it.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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28 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Ten Gallons of fun at Cowboys; A Changing world shows its moves on the dance floor. Part One

Ok, Nelly Furtado CD (Whoa Nelly!) is jamming "Shadow in the Sky".... Check! All boxes unopened (they all arrived today, yay!) looking like a hurricane hit the place.... Check! Belly full from a traditional visit to Chef Lynn's Buffet (I only do one trip, one plate).... Check!

And I'm ready to write after a lazy day sleeping in and a great afternoon touring the old Chattanooga Choo Choo rail yard complex with Becky, Bill and their adorable granddaughter Megan!

So where was I, ah yes Cowboys and my deep thoughts on a seemingly shallow place...first a description;

Think Dave and Busters meet Honky Tonk Bar with a twist of Dirty Dancing in the Poconos in the 1960's. Sprawling 10,000 square foot multi-faceted club that includes 3 bars, mechanical bull ride area, pool tables, dance floor and a bevy of patrons of all sizes, ages, nationalities, races, shapes and persuasions!

Not a stitch of originality on the exterior of its façade which is plopped on the rear side of a box-store mall. Two doors have white vinyl lettering that just read "Enter", above it in neon "Electric Cowboy" - the entertainment centers official name - though everybody refers to it as just "Cowboys". Overheard that week and on past visits; "Hey, you in town, you should party with us at Cowboys" or "Man the women at Cowboys...you gotta see em" or "that bull at Cowboys, nuttin like it".

I must admit my first reaction was one of pure line dancing honkey tonk, so I had always steered clear from it, preferring to dance the night away at nearby "The Drink" a hip hop club that had just my music, serious dancers and bore a striking resemblance to another one of my favorite clubs in Daytona Florida called "Fuel".

On each subsequent visit, I talked myself out of going to Cowboys but on this occasion, I had promised Nathan (Bill and Becky's son) I'd try it out since he insisted I atleast needed to see it "for a few minutes...then u can go to The Drink"...which actually was my plan. I ended up spending the rest of the night at Cowboys, slowly and steadily the place grew on me and I found myself really people watching and people examining as I danced the night away. But as I entered...and took Cowboys in for the first time...i thought this was the last place I'd want to hang.

First, the bouncer gave me shit for wearing a hat – my favorite Golf-like wool Kangol – call it my "lucky hat" – I'll let u decipher lucky. In any case, back to trek to the car that was parked in a massive sprawled parking lot. OH yes, I mean my borrowed car...actually Holly's car (Becky and Bill's daughter) but Holly is in England...so its mine for nights like these.

It is then when it dawned on me...I was in a sea of vehicles that stretched as far as the eye could see. The mall was way closed by this time so that meant this was just folks showing up to party at Cowboys. Now I'm from a big city so Chattanooga is like a village in my eyes...how can I best express this...it looked as if ALL OF CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE was parked outside. OK, so this place was popular...I get it!

Lots of pick-up trucks with roll bars and shotgun holdsters, mud flaps and the fresh mud to go with it. But to be fair, I saw Lexuses and Audi's, motorbike crotch rockets and the occasional boxy Zions.

My favorite hat ditched, hair a total mess, my confidence a bit dinged I proceeded in, paid my 5 bucks and rounded a corner after a long neon lit hallway to find about 150 people in the middle of a raised wooden dance floor line dancing to some country song!

Arghhh! "I'm givin this place 5 minutes tops" I muttered while Nathan and his buddy Omar kept reminded me that there were ...remarkably as if this was going to bowl me over.... "three bars here! That's right three!". No one really understands it when I say I don't drink as if I'm saying "I'm not drinkin tonight"...No, I don't drink. Period, so no amount of bar prowess will impress me. Plus, I miss my hat!

I surveyed the room and it then dawned on me and I clearly mouthed as loud as I could over a steel guitar solo to the boys.... "every fucker in this place is wearing a hat!"

Ten Gallons mostly. That's right, I was in a sea of Cowboys at "Cowboys". I guess the bouncer that told me to ditch mine only meant that strictly Cowboy hats were allowed.

At this point, I was seconds from bolting when the music suddenly changed and the DJ decided to drop Kanye West's "Goldigger" which is like waving a red flag in front of a bull with me. Though I'll generally dance to anything, hip-hop is like my drug. It just moves me in a way no other music can. I forgot about the hat, ignored the sea of ten gallons in the room and just hit the floor.

Most of the cowpokes fled too, but later as I regained my wits and slowed down from the rush, it dawned on me that some of the cowboys stayed, quite a few cute cowgirls too and a new crowd of corporate types, Latinos and a few African Americans were all getting down where once stood a sea of Bonanza types stompin boots and belt buckles to Billy Ray Cyrus like music.

Hmmm. This was interesting! I might stay a while. I am glad I did. Though a few moments later the music abruptly changed to a slow country ballad so I decided to continue my tour of this Dodge City themed pleasure palace.

Next to the second bar and in between a billiard hall and the "Cactus Cantina" stood a long line waiting to hop on "pete" the electronic bull that looked nothing like a bull. Five bucks gets ya on for a 5 minute ride. Though by the end of my

observations it looks like this is in fact Cowboy's big marketing draw.

Fifteen minutes in I realized that only women were riding and not so gingerly flying off the padded bull onto the vinyl padded flooring surrounded by authentic steel ranch fencing. Obviously the guys were lovin this. As I am sure they enjoy the Electric Cowboy uniforms worn by an army of waitresses carrying fluorescent beaker shots, ice cold brews and nacho plates. Lets just say they bring the terms "hip-hugging" and "skimpy" into a whole new dimension!

So yes, there is eye candy here, no doubt but it was when I returned to the dance floor that the bigger picture hit me. Here we were surrounded by stereotypical symbols of southern culture and within the enclave of rebel-raising rednecks...and on the dance floor were blinged-out "Nelly's", preppy eye-glass wearing "Napolean Dynamites" getting down with Jessica Simpson-like blonds with big hair and the Ten Gallon hat club doin the Macarena. Amazing!

Were we in the midst of a Kid Rock video shoot (minus the little people) or was this concrete proof that social and class distinctions are being obliterated thanks to pop culture! That is a dangerous statement for sure, even I am one of pop cultures strongest critics. But when you see Jethro and Billy Bob toss their leather bolos and begin breakdancing (yes I swear this happened, luckily after I rolled my jaw up off the floor) you know something powerful is at work.

Maybe the same forces that made East Germany long to break down the "wall" and join the rest of the world, was at work here? Were we in an unusual pocket of progress or is the New South really a reality? Influence thru the media and the popularity of pop-culture fads have proven to be more powerful than political propaganda. So it should be no surprise that everybody has been exposed.

continued tomorrow, jan 29th entry

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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27 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Cesar goes for a ride; Dirt-biking down Hurricane creek Road and clubbing with Cowboys Part 1
Damn! The boxes I wanted did not arrive today. They are in Atlanta. I'm tracking their every move. I had them sent "slow boat to China" (media mail) to save some bucks in shipping so I guess I will pay the price for that. Maybe they will arrive tomorrow.

So I took care of some other business like write to Greyhound and ask for a refund on a ticket I did not use. Renegotiate a debt owed me by The Catalina Ferry (I was once their marketing director for a weekend launch of their service from LA to the Island of Catalina - sometimes it scary how many jobs I've had), and weeded down my clothes (I'm sorta a clothes whore recently - though I only buy from thrift stores, but it's gotten overwhelming so I've got a bag full of stuff for Goodwill).

So... i decided...to take the day off today!

Which will sound funny to all those of you who might know me and say; "Cesar! All your days are off! Silly boy." Well that is sorta true. Actually I'm anxiously awaiting word about this year's tour schedule. For those of you who don't know, for about 5 months of the year I live and work in DC, Boston, Philly and New York city leading tours for Educational Field Trips. About this time of year I get my schedule and can plan out the pockets of time in between tours to continue my walk.

Checked the e-mail.... and nothing! So I headed out.... for a great bike ride. Becky and Bill have this old Schwinn lookin dirt bike with a girlie seat and great springs. I took one look at that thing and said. "Wow, I'm outa here!" Becky and I agreed to

meet later to go for our walk, so after checking the tires and grabbing my outgoing mail, I was out the garage and whizzing down the hill on Hurricane Creek Road.

I love these moments of my journey, when I'm in a city that truly isn't mine, but from the looks of it (in terms of people lookin at me) I could very well be a resident. Besides I knew where the post office was so I figure I'd bike there and not trouble Becky, even though I knew she'd be happy to take me.

I used to have a bike like this, minus the girlie seat of course, I remember an era in my life where it was my only form of transportation. I was 6 or 7 when I got it. Under the tree at Christmas. A beautiful yellow Schwinn dirt bike. I used to haul ass down the street on that thing, and at certain driveways or dusty areas, I'd slam on the brakes (by just depressing my foot hard on the peddle - nowadays I have noticed most or all bikes have the hand brakes) and skid into a 180 turn that was....just so fucking cool!

That all came back to me the moment I was whizzing down Hurrican Creek Road - and I mean I was cookin - so I leaned back on the peddle to slow the bike down and all of a sudden I heard that rough, rubbery, high pitched skid sound I had not heard in nearly 20 years. The tail end of the bike began to shift to the right, and to tell ya the truth, I almost lost control of this small bike with its girlie seat! This would have been not a good thing since it was all down hill. I decided then and there to slow MY ASS down!

But it was a rush!

Riding on the side of the road was not as easy as one would think, in fact I have always been amazed at how the automobile culture has gobled up everything in sight including mere shoulders on the side of even small roads. This was no highway, just two lane Brainerd Road. I ride against traffic so I can see everybody and they can see me. But still, driver's react with great surprise that there is someone coming at them in a vehicle other than a car.

I got to the post office and mailed out yesterday's letters. There is little time to take care of business in the period between hiring Becky as my new assistant and that of my former one Sandi, who was great but her life got complicated with family health issues and admittedly I swamped her with work she was not well versed to handle.

So I hesitate putting all or anything on Becky's shoulder until she slowly learns all that I may need of her, and to do so, we talk a lot. Especially on our walks. The plan was for me to call her from a pay phone and she would pick me and the bike up and we'd go to walk around a local park, for this, our fourth day in a row that Becky has been newly inspired to walk for exercise.

Becky is an insulin dependent Type II Diabetic so we share a great deal in that department but she and Bill have taken a keen interest in my trip, life and friendship. They are probably one of only a handful of people that have read just about everything I have ever written, been publicized in, etc.. Each time I visit there is a wonderful litany of insightful questions they are dying to know.

I align myself with people who really understand my life and life's purpose. This is a rarity. Yes lots of people think what I do and how I live my life is "cool" or "unique" (and to be honest there are those who think I'm full of shit) but few people really understand it to the core. I would rather have somebody passionate about what I do, help me, even if they are not knowledgeable in the how to dept. than to have someone just perform a task to perform a task.

Becky struggles with her diabetes, her addiction to food the same as I did. I give her pep talks and help her on her eating regimen. For example tonight I fixed my mother's Cuban Shrimp Creole dish, and Becky carefully measured a ½ cup of rice before she placed it on her plate. Though proud of her for watching numbers like a hawk, I gingerly introduced the notion that "maybe one day" she will be able to

trust her instincts and not be a slave to too many numbers that in and of themselves imprison a person's freedoms.

I lost this particular match but it is just as well, she made me realize that before she can let go, she needs to learn what foods have what carbs, calories etc...And she is right. I forget how evolved I am on this front. I guess I use the "force", a higher understanding of how much is just enough. She did add, "but Cesar ur will power is stronger than mine" - a fact I forget. An amazingly true statement that even at time freaks me out because there was once an era where I just had none.

The evening went on with a visit to a club called Cowboys with Becky and Bill's son Nathan (Nate) and his buddy Omar. I always make it a point to dance my ass off whenever I get the chance. I'm saving the next blog for tomorrow as it is now 4am and I am sitting here in a sopping shirt. It is drenched from a night that included hip-hop dancing southern white boys with ten gallon hats and modern cowgirl-looking women like Cindy who defy both age stereotypes and reinforce the adage of not judging the book by its cover.

I know, I know, its just a dance club! I've been told by many I look way to deep into things. Well its either a gift or a curse. Where one sees a pick-up joint I see a place where u can see concrete proof of the obliteration of social and class distinctions that quite frankly was once overtly negatively on parade in this country - especially in the south!

Stay tuned for the rest of those thoughts tomorrow!

Goodni ght.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN.

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25 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Slaying the beast; part two of a series. John Tesh is not my favorite radio disc jockey but he's a friend now in the wee hours of the morning inside a basement on the outskirts of Chattanooga. He does this ongoing "for your life" segment where he gives advice on all sorts of topics. I had to chuckle cuz he just did one on battling clutter. A battle that still wages on.

Now some or most people will laugh at my clutter. Really laugh. In comparison to their garages, storage areas, six bedroom houses and collections of nicknacks, i am devoid of headaches that come with household stuff.

But paper might just be one area where i got them beat.

Reams and reams of it seem to follow me everywhere. So much so that i think i am freaking out the Bridges family which have been so brave to be the host site for this final showdown.

I met Becky, Bill Bridges many moths ago when their daughter Holly (a fellow nomad who has now moved to England) invited me over to their home on Shady Fork Road the very day i crossed the Georgia/Tennessee border.

I hit it off really well with them all and i subsequently hired Becky as my assistant. Now i'm not made of money, but with little overhead i can afford her help from time to time and i ahve already been blessed with her organizational talents.

With that said, i dont think she or Bill really know what they are getting into. But they are enthused by my lifestyle, open minded about the world and really "get" what i'm up to.

So i have taken over their basement apartment in the hopes of "slaying the dragon",

which is my way of saying i really have come to the conclusion that although i have been able to travel freely (without a lot of stuff) it still weighs on me that a box here and a box there of my stuff is spread all over the country.

Maybe its a bit nuerotic but i feel i cant be totally free in a modern nomadic way (whatever the hell that is - i'm sort of making this up as i go along) until i can just journey without anything flapping in the wind.

My goal is a streamlined vehicle that can whisk in and out of any situation. And so i've been emptying boxes of letterhead (so old school), envelopes (one of my weaknesses - mailing stuff), newsclippings (i seem to have 5 of each article ever published on me or my projects) and an assorted amount of small papers (business cards, scribbled notes).

These are just a few of the things i'm pulling out of these boxes. So what to do with it all. Well, here is my plan; Most photos, news articles and documents that i will need in the future for jobs, sponsorship proposals, etc..are all being sent to northern Vermont.

What's in Northern Vermont? Well, aside from a temporary storage facility (his words not mine) lies the talented Mr. Richard Sassaman and his trusty scanner and his equally trusty experience in the land of digital image prowess.

Richard is currently creating an image database that will digitally house all photos, news clippings and other documents i need to do what i do...wherever and whenever i need them. There they will be allways at the ready...on the net. Or if need be on a disk or hard drive...ready to be zapped to an editor, marketing director, conference director, etc....

Gone (hopefully soon) will be the days where i have ti drop everything, call mom (no hard feelings mom, yu have always been an amazing assistant), sister (my frst hired hand - equally amazing), or an assistant in Los Angeles, St. Louis (both areas that i had hired folks that put things in motion) ...and have them search for articles, write letters, race to office depot, make copies and mail, fed-ex or fax them all over the place...all the while tryingto beat deadlines and live their own lives.

Besides the technology is in place to do so...so why not give it a try.

Some items have already been sent to Jason Friedman, my web designer who has informed me that we have successfully now aquired www.planetcesar.com (dont bother going to it yet, there is nothing there) which will help better link up all projects, blogs, and communications with all of u who are enjoying (i hope) the world of planetcesar.

To do all this, i am a firm believer in lots and lots of surface space. The basement apartment is no office so i've rigged up areas on the couches here to hold up long boards that now act as tables. Bought an 8 foot table as well from Office Depot. Cleared coffee tables, moved lamps and used up every square inch of any other surfaces like shelves, TV tops, etc...

John Tesh's show doesnt cover tips for nomads. Everything in the piece was about kitchen clutter, closet cabinetry, car trunk organizers and my favorite; what to do with hundreds of empty CD covers!

I once had those problems. But as i began travelling my dependence on them and my attitude on stuff changed. It also depends on what u are newly accustomed to. For example after the 50 state road trip, the few items i did leave behind seem superfulous to me.

It made sense, for one year i lived and needed only those items that could fit inside a 1979 Chevy Malibu Classic Station Wagon. On the hike, the comfort level re-adjusted to just what could fit inside of a small GoLite backpack that in itself

only weighed 12 ounces empty, 15 pounds full!

We all have organizational issues. Mine just happen to be converging in a basement in Chattanooga finally....i get to hopefully deal with it once and for all.

Course the above explanation is overly simplified, so tomorrow i will tackle the more psychological/bigger picture version of how stuff creeps into our lives.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

24 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Slaying the beast; I begin tackling and downsizing my paper empire! Part 1 of a series.

The story is legendary but i'm of the opinion that since i'm not a Paul Bunyan like figure, not everybody has heard it. Basically about a decade ago, I was a serious pack-rat.

I had things. All sorts of things. In no less than 6 locations spread out all over Miami. I was the president of The Miami Memorabilia Collector's Club (of course this didn't help much) and my problem was that although most of our members liked to focus on one particular item/theme/collection....well, i collected anything.

Old letters from the Tropicair Drive In, postcards, political posters, an old Miami Herald Newspaper bin, records, board games, etc... It was bad. Really bad.

My real downfall was the land of ephemera (which can basically cover anything made of paper). You name it, if it was paper like, i was magnetically attracted to it. Sticky fingers Becerra you could say.

There were no less than 32 boxes in my parents attic, there were piles of stuff and more boxes in their garage, my room was to the brim with things, books, more paper, office supplies from garage sales. It got so bad that my parents built a shed in the back yard to give them some breathing room.

Well i quickly filled that! so much so that i myself built a smaller rough shed for just my camping equipment that originally was in the shed. When i moved out, my stuff stayed right where it was and i collected some more, filling up the area below the stage at The Woman's Club of Coconut Grove, my new home (i was the caretaker for 2 years - 2 years where even more stuff accumulated).

When i assumed the position of director of education at The Gold Coast Railroad Museum, i was given access to a giant brick warehouse that was not being used. I filled a quarter of that in no time. Big stuff began to flow into that space. Since i had my trusty station wagon, i could haul things as large as lets say a 57 Chevy front bumper!

And yes that is not just a hypothetical example. I really did drag one of those into the warehouse!

Boy just thinking of all that stuff makes me sick. Luckily that was the past. Today i am down to basically 12 boxes of paper. Four of the 12 boxes have been shipped to a home in Chattanooga, TN where they now sit inside a basement that will prove to be the final battle ground in a war i've been waging against myself for all my life.

At this very time i have just begin to open them up and have spread out their contents. If you were here, you could would think a bomb exploded. Piles everywhere, slivers of paper here, business cards there, notes, articles, envelopes etc..

The stage is set to take a last crack at an idea i have had for years, a journey that i will invite you on.

My plan is to finally go paperless.

Easier said than done.

The plan is not simple. Those that know me well, know that nothing about me is simple. But i think it can work.

How i got here is quite a story. And i think its one that might help others tackle clutter in their own lives.

Tomorrow i will begin with the baby steps i took nearly a decade ago to get to this point in my life.

Cesar Becerra
Chattanooga, TN

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24 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Last of Loft Series, Part 5, the rest can be read from Jan 20, 21, 22, 23rd
Continued from Jan 23rd - last in series

"How long have you had this? Why did you buy this? Was it a gift? When was the last time you used it? Hell, when was the last time you touched it? Does it fit with the new you? Does it even fit in the loft?" Relentless, but fair. If you fight for it hard enough and you (or I) don't easily see thru the veneer of your own lame-ass excuses then I might let you keep it. But I'm not just there to throw things out, I'm there to make sure you really use it not the other way around. Stuff has a habit or can actually own you!

Marji was a delight. We had few arguments. She loved the process. Now I'm not cheap in what I charge for my services but my week of hard work was covered in the garage sale profits realized later that weekend. But the big victory was that Marji was not just moving to a new home, but she was moving with just what she needed, just what matched her new life, her new outlook.

Downsizing is contagious. I can see her head just thinking of other things to get rid of even today. On a bigger level, she has even downsized her financial portfolio (she remarked to me recently how nice it was - upon buying her new loft - to not have to present the bank and lenders a litany of properties she owned money and just a few healthy assets and just one home (her other loft). She has even decided to radically downsize her life. After nearly two decades at the helm of her consulting firm, she has told her partner she wants out... and its no mere lip service... Marji is getting out... soon! She's now working on one of the last accounts she had long range responsibility on, but its clear that her mind is elsewhere.

She'd like to travel, like to discover a way to morph her loft loving life (both living and investing in them) into a viable income, and let loose a little. She doesn't even see her self living in the very loft she moved into for long (maybe a few years).

The change has begun. The transformation complete. The train that was once barreling into a life of comfortable-boredom has now sailed! The new trains run by her loft, visible as I looked out one of the bathrooms while I shaved one morning. So close that a conductor half-confusingly waived to me on another pass as the trains were coupling in the yard. The look was quizzical. Was the warehouse a home or had he seen a ghost?

It was all very real I'm afraid. An army of zombies slowly are awakening and feeling a bit empty...a bit detached from the real world. Their simulated homes and neighborhoods are feeling oppressive. They come to the rail yards to bask in the glow of the skyscrapers. Marji was not the first but luckily as I am observing the

trend... is not the last!

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

Special note; It is my hope that any of you can share your thoughts on this series by zapping them to me at cesarwalks@yahoo.com

After spending time with Marji i was off to Chattanooga to put all the above mentioned ideals to the test on my own stuff.

For some the journey of downsizing is a long one. For me its been a ten year journey that you will no doubt hear about. Awaiting me in Chattanooga are 12 boxes (mostly really all of it papers) that contain what is left of my possessions!

OK there are maybe 3 boxes, some shirts and pants and some books but the majority of the clutter left from a life of travel is sitting in a basement on Shady Fork Rd. It is there where intend to "slay the dragon" and begin my quest to go paperless!

It will not be easy, so enjoy the next few days of both heaven and hell. Even i struggle with stuff.

A duffle bag filled with most of my clothes was all i put underneath the Greyhound Bus before boarding in the cold rain. I slipped my ticket to the driver and boarded.

As Atlanta slowly dissappeared i couldn't help but smile as i passed dilapidated brick warehouses and storefronts that are just waiting to be discovered. Marji and others raising themselves on the balls of their feet, poking noses onto warped glass...peering into...the past and at the same time...a future.

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23 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Loft Series, Part 4, the rest can be read from Jan 20, 21, 22nd

Again so that nobody is confused, u can read the 1st three parts beginning on Jan 20.

So there i am staring at what can be best described as a text book example of the modern corporate woman. Tall (i'm thinking 6 foot), extremely well presented (power clothes, hair, nails, etc) and obviously successful in her own right (co-owner of a business, collector of art, etc).

Now I'm a pretty radical dude yet even I was swayed with thoughts of inadequacy and lower social status. That has never stopped me from heading into many enclaves of wealth and social settings but I must admit this one seemed a bit more daunting.

Perhaps it was the fact that Marji's house was so museum-like. Every art work, fragile glass vases perfectly placed on their own customized shelves, kitchen looking like a Better Homes and Gardens photo shoot. The designer couch of which I was to "couch surf" on probably was worth more than what was in my bank account at the time!

But something seemed amiss. Thanks to my reading of Malcom Gladwell's book "Blink" about the ability of our minds to make ultra quick assessments of situations, I trusted a gut feeling inside of me that made me wonder if the landscape before me lined up with the horizon. Was this Marji's world, or the world in which she wanted me to believe she was part of for some other alternative reason?

Which brings up a few points: Are we what we live in? Or do we use our dwellings as a modern day decoy to mask or accentuate a truth or falsehood that we would like to advertise?

Not too much later, Marji explained that she had originally placed a posting on Couch Surfing to help her two sons get better acquainted with Europe. She thought it was a good way to get in touch with the pulse of a place. Yet the fact that she would agree to host strangers tells volumes about the state of Marji's life at that point.

See the mere act of signing up with Couch Surfers is a bit of a rebellious act against conformity and norm-think (normal thinking, I'm coining a new term ala Orwellian like thoughts) especially for people in Marji's station of life. Although she can be easily lumped into one category – that of successful, affluent, high class woman – Marji in essence is a closet-freethinker who's very open-mindedness would scare most people that look and live like her.

Marji for years struggled with life's ups and downs; kids (3), marriage, financial struggle, failed relationship/s, single mother challenges, building a business and all-the-while trying to keep it all together. When years later, she finally made it and things began to take turns for the better, her comfort level rose but along with it the ability to comfortably manage each and every aspect of the new empire without losing yourself.

She bought the house as a long needed bookend to scream to the world that she had made it despite the struggles. Its perfect outwardly and inwardly appearance was a testament to the fact that she had utter control over all of life's potholes. But there was a brewing unrest in some key aspects of her life.

I got wind of this as I soon saw that Marji was intrigued at having a window into another, radically simple life; namely mine. Now I cannot take credit here for it is my belief that Marji had already been hard wired as a person yearning to downsize, aching to break free of a world that although she could maneuver in (making money, acquiring possessions, etc) was in the end, slowly cornering her.

It is exhausting to hold up such a perfect world. The world of the lofts went hand in hand with her love of art. Not only acquiring unique pieces but sometimes seeing something that nobody else can see. The Castleberry area of downtown Atlanta, where most new cutting edge galleries are found was the very area where most of her "finds" were found. It is no coincidence that all of these galleries are housed in old converted warehouses, many of which are or are next to lofts themselves!

So she began to acquire them as well. Falling in love with the hunt of finding a diamond in the rough, later the utter enjoyment of the battle to beat others to it, and then tweaking them with unique renovations/upgrades/custom touches that would help bring out their quirkiness (something like the art of hanging and lighting an artwork on just the right surface).

But again she was doing this from afar. Commuting nearly an hour to work on her new found hobby and part time investment strategy. When I met Marji, she became fascinated with my simplified approach to life. I was happy and really all I had was the pack on my back. This was and still is a radical notion. Though I cannot take credit for her incredible progress in just one year's time (due to the fact that it is my impression that I can only help folks that are already bent that way), I know I have been instrumental in cheering Marji on and on occasion playing an active role in helping her downsize in a smart smart way.

"There came a time one day that I realized, this (the Mc Mansion inside a gated community with way to many empty rooms) was not me anymore." Explained Marji. On a subsequent visit to her home I was a witness to her newly discovered unrest of suburban living; It came after a moment of frustration as the remote control failed (for like the millionth time) to open the front iron gate of The Wescott development "Fuck! I hate this damn gate! I don't even know why it's here?"

Strong words for a woman who once bought into the entire package. But Marji is one of the brave ones. Courageous in her new found conviction that if it aint real, she aint interested in it. She decided to move into one of her lofts, the very one next to the railroad tracks at 602 Marietta Street, a place that is so in touch with real it makes 992 Wescott look like Disney World. Which is fine for most folks, but now and finally...unbearable for "the new Marji."

The move had to echo the spirit of the bold statement of her turning over a new leaf. Nothing from the old ways of the past could follow her. Some who know Marji might see her new place now and just say "congrats on your move" and think that she merely moved the pieces down a few miles, but they have no idea of the deeper transformation that went this move.

For one, she hired me. Probably and admittedly the most gentle yet firm radical taskmaster around when it comes to downsizing. With me you have to make and plead your case for every item you feel you just have to have. I also go deeper and watch for chinks that hold people back. Over the years, Marji had accumulated an immense amount of stuff (see both of these hyper links for further details).

<http://planetcesar.blogspot.com/2005/11/mega-garage-sale-on-wescott-lane.html>

<http://planetcesar.blogspot.com/2005/11/in-land-of-boxes-garage-sailing-in-atl.html>

One issue was the stuff that wasn't even Marji's! For years her home was the dump station for lots of her 3 kids stuff/junk/worldly possessions. Most were off traveling so it was impossible to downsize them so I came up with a plan; though I hated to place all their stuff in storage, I proposed to Marji that we weren't getting a storage unit, but a "storage unit with a plan". Out their stuff went but under the understanding that each of her children would have to pay half of the 6 months rent and at the end of the six months the unit would be their responsibility. We even had one of their names placed on the contract with the storage company for just that scenario.

For days I hauled off tons of stuff big and small from just the areas of the house that you could not see (the drawers, the cabinets, the attic, basement and closets – all of which are the epicenters of both clutter and drain of money). I would spread out the findings on large tables and take each thru the motions;

Continued on Jan 23rd...

Cesar Becerra

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22 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Loft Series, Part 3 of 4 part series, see Jan 20, 21, 22, and 23rd

So nobody is confused, Part 1 is on Jan 20, Part 2 is on Jan 21st and this is part of loft story.

So on my last day of my trip to Atlanta, as i was packing, Marji got the call. "Oh my gosh, we gotta go, right now!" I could be placing the last bid in about half an hour, i want ur opinion, lets go!"

Marji had been eyeballing a property even bigger than the one she now lives in. It's a property that, from the outside atleast, would interest few people. Actually just looks like an old storefront with an ugly wood paneling circa 1980's painted blue! And this is a valuable lesson in the realm of lofts; you have to have a hunch, a feel that there is a gem inside.

Indeed one the door opened and I could not see a ceiling until my neck was strained as far back as it could go, the feeling hit me. WOW, there is something special about this place. After ascending several steps a beautiful acre of hard wood floors

expanded back to meet a brick wall with two massive windows encrusted with layers of paint that just gave the entire place a time travel portal feeling.

And it is just that. A true loft will take you back. A faux loft will just impress. They are two different can of worms there. In anycase an old 6 inch refrigerator door was cracked open, its old steel latch still in operating order made for a unique feeling into the first room I peeked into.

An odd space (lofts have unusual and wonderful odd spaces) was illuminated from a skylight above giving the bricks one of those glows that can only best be described as that moment where Indiana Jones slips into the "temple of doom" for the first time.

As we toured the rest of the "roller coaster loft" as I christened it (since the stairs then descend into another level, plus has a spiraling wooden staircase into another level) friend and real estate agent Bridget would count down the minutes left on the final call in for final bids. "Two minutes now Marji, I suggest we put them out at 250 what do you wanna do?"

Marji looked around, breathed deeply, eyeballed the loft that measures roughly 100 feet long by 50 feet wide, turned to Bridget and said; "Let's do it!"

It is a far cry from the world that I first met Marji in. While walking thru Macon, Ga I began putting out the feelers for places to stay when I'd eventually reach Atlanta. Couch surfing was one of my portals and I got several responses back, one from Marji who said she lived in a gated community near a Marta (Atlanta's above ground subway system) station. Bingo!

I love to use public transportation and hate to bother anybody that offers to host me, so I said I'd just show up at her door. Only I had forgotten what she said about the gate. The code she had given me was not to be found. I don't know where I put it. So luckily when I arrived, it was one of those gates that are perfect for keeping cars out but I managed to slip in under a massive gap on the left side! So much for "gate protected" community.

Wescott was the community name and Marji lived at 992 Wescot Lane inside a massive 3 story house whose facade went straight up like a rocket. It kinda had a pancake-like flattened look that took more advantage of the lot's ability to make money than that of the aesthetics that go into a well designed home.

I had reservations and I must admit some prejudice about these types of communities. I had crossed many of these on the worldwalk but this one seemed to incorporate all of the worse characteristics of all of them combined. The mailboxes were all identical, the driveways had the worse high pitched narrow angles, the garage doors were front and center, the moldings intended to mimic that old time neighborhood look just came across so fake, etc...

I had to admit that though I had been hosted in some amazing houses in the past, this one just did not match the type of person that would generally take in a homeless nomadic worldwalker. As I walked up the steps, knocked on the door and awaited entry, my pulse quickened a bit.

A silhouette of a tall corporate type figure could be seen descending yet another staircase I could make out through the side windows. I braced myself, hoping that I did not look too shabby from a day's voyage, wondering if I'd have to be immediately quarantined into a side room before being allowed to enter this pristine looking, intimidating mansion?

The door opened and a wide smiling face greeted me with even wider arms and gave me a welcome hug as if she had known me all along. Sometimes your world can change when it comes in contact with another parallel universe. I have always said that I love my lifestyle the most on those days I go from one extreme to the other. Sweaty and sticky, grubby and unshaven I entered Marji's monstrous, fancy, elegant (and what I

thought as pretentious) home.

Two extremes? At the moment, sure, that is exactly how I saw it. Saying under my breath, "what have I gotten myself into now", the same thought that hit me when I waltzed down the long driveway into The Breakers Resort in Palm Beach wearing just a backpack. But appearances can be deceiving. And this would quickly turn out to be the "mother" of all deceptions. In an incredibly amazing way.

Story continues on Part 4, Jan 23rd

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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21 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Loft Series, Part 2 of 4 part series, see Jan 20, 21, 22, and 23rd

For this to make sense, some of you will have to read the entry i posted under Jan 20th since that was part one and this part two!

So there i was on that platform mesmerized that Miami had an actual scene happening at night. Little did i know that very same day they were imploding the old Everglades Hotel to make way for a Condo high rise. Now normally this would be a tragedy but in these modern times you have to take the good with the bad.

No they werent gonna save the old historic hotel but they also werent going to build on virgin Everglades land 20 miles west. People were moving to downtown and that is an amazing blessing for saving a city's soul really, not just its wetlands.

Case in point when i lived in Venice Beach, CA at an old Edison Electric, Co. powerplant called "The Powerhouse" which was nothing more than an old brick building circa 1920's that should have easily been demolished but was now being saved, rented out to a group of filmmakers that i would helm their marketing efforts.

The hottest thing in Venice was the loft approach and the two kings were a pair of new age but older hippies that in the 1970's were keen enough to buy almost every available old warehouse structure and are now selling them for mega bucks.

Both of these men are millionaires. One has pink hair and 12 inch nails (Mona), the other whose name escapes me at the moment is a man u'd pass on the street and not think twice that their "Gas Co Real Estate" firm is basically printing money.

In downtown Los Angeles, i also got to live for a few months inside the most extensive real life loft complex i think exists on earth, I say this because it is actually a converted brewery that houses no less than 300 converted warehouse spaces into homes and galleries.

"The Brewery" as it is known is a maze of unique spaces in a complex so large that you sometimes (in traversing long hallways or riding up freight elevators) forget you are even in a loft conversion project.

You actually feel you are back at the Pabst Blue Ribbon bottling plant. In fact one entry way still sports the logo etched into the concrete from an old lobby area. Everything is intact. In fact, purists dare not remove even the smokestacks, old fire wheels, industrial steel girding.

It might be ugly to someone on Wysteria Lane but at 601 Morton Street at The Brewery, its heaven on earth. It was at 601 where i worked and lived inside a 20,000 square foot monstrosity that housed 14 different artists under the banner of a project called The Incubator. The rent alone was 5 grand a month! Buy or rent,

obviously there is a demand.

So the question has to be asked; Why is it so damn popular to not only own a loft but if you can't, why is it so cool to own a faux, loft looking apt?

I mean let's face it, some of these places look like a bomb fall-out shelter. Old bricks crumbling, concrete patches, cracked concrete floors.....all of which are left alone and dolled up with ultra clean line modern furniture, track lighting (to actually highlight these blemishes and celebrate them) and rusted steel beams!

I think it has a lot to do with a return to something real, authentic and historic. We have had it with fake, with dullness packaged and bar-coded at The Home Depot. The sameness of the suburbs just can't compete with the gritty-ness and "keep it real-ness" of the urban core.

So it is that Atlanta began to boom, or for that matter any city that has been actively pursuing Suburban blight for at least a decade. New stuff, not to be confused with ranch house communities. We are talking, cookie cutter sameness and mega miles away from work for most folks.

I think after ten years, folks really begin to see and question the fact that their lives are being spent in an environment that is mega artificial. The car, its offspring of congestion, highways, box stores and the only respite is a home that looks identical to your neighbors.

And so it was that Marji felt the pang. For another life. Another her. A better connection to the real, not to settle down with the fake simulation of a mayberry community that never really existed.

Her home on Marietta Street (in the shadow's of Atlanta's downtown skyscrapers) is a testament to a long journey that a modern person takes in trying to live the American Dream.

It is terribly intertwined with shallow potholes that never seem quite damaging to your soul but collectively, over the years can threaten to erase it.

Our story continues in Part Three, found on the above blog dated Jan 22.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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20 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - All (future?) roads lead to Rome? To Loft or not to Loft....this seems to be the question! Part one of a four part series. Jan 20, 21, 22 and 23.

Petting "Leenda", the Costa Rican mutt (adopted by Ori a years back) was painful. Those sad eyes looking up at me, saying, "please don't leave"

In any case arriving momentarily was my great friend Marji, (former couch surf host - there passes a time where upon multiple visits you just become friends - and she is a super one) to pick me up and whisk me off the Rome, Georgia to go speculating on the pulse of real estate futures, particularly in the renovation of historic buildings into a Lofts.

Marji has purchased, renovated, and sold a few, while living north of the city in a gated, suburban, cookie cutter community that just this past year she decided "was no longer me!"

She thought hard, sold the house, hired me to liquidate and downsize and move.....into her favorite loft on 602 Marietta Street, which I have played a small

(maybe vital) role in helping her make it her new home.

Now there are lofts and there are "feux" lofts. Be careful of the distinctions. Lots of folks are selling lofts that really should be advertising "apartments that actually have a loft-look" instead of just lofts.

In my opinion and that of the purists, a loft is an old, previously built building that served its purpose as anything but a home, and that now has been converted into a place of residence.

Marji's Marietta Street Loft is an amazing old warehouse that sits (get this!) next to no less than the major CSX (railroad) artery that cuts thru downtown Atlanta. For those of you thinking, "why the hell would someone want to do that?" know that this trend is not only here to stay but is incredibly both lucrative and a leading strain of hope in the historical preservation movement.

Many years ago (I'll say 6 to 10) you wouldn't be caught dead in the center of say Downtown Miami, Los Angeles or Atlanta. Especially at night. Forget about actually living there. While suburbs spread, folks only really used downtown for daylight purposes only; tourism, skyscraper/corporate job, maybe to take in the occasional festival or concert (at least Miami was).

By day's end, everybody got the "hell out of Dodge!" Downtown was a ghost town, abandoned. The occasional homeless folks walking the street, a police cruiser, but absolutely no activity whatsoever.

Then the revolution came. Where exactly it started is anybody's guess. In Miami, it was with a movement ironically begun by an environmental group called the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida who sounded the alarm with a catchy phrase called "Eastward Ho!"

Basically in Miami, development was always moving west, unfortunately acres and acres of quasi Everglades lands were being engulfed by sidewalks, cookie cutter homes and convenient stores (just to name a few).

Eastward Ho! promoted a thought to develop on lands that had already been built upon instead of raw land. Even if it meant tearing down a previously existing property.

Now I don't know if it was their movement that really made it all happen, but it didn't hurt. Slowly, while South Beach was really becoming hot, the island in between Miami Beach and Miami proper got hot too. P-Diddy, Gloria Estefan, Oprah, etc, bought houses. And next thing you know, wealthy South American families did the same.

One day while arriving in Miami via Greyhound, I stood on a raised platform at 6am awaiting the next metro to take me to the bigger (subway like) Metro Rail and I noticed something strange.

Below me, in a very skimpy outfit walked a few women. Behind them a guy in a suit and funny hat. Three hookers and a pimp were my first thoughts. But a mere 15 seconds afterwards, a few more ladies were walking down the sidewalk as well.

Then I noticed a guy in a tuxedo, hopping into a jaguar and proceeding to give the driver a ticket. What! This was a valet service operating at 6am. I was really confused.

I walked to the other end of the platform to get a better view and then it hit me like a ton of bricks. In my view now was the nightclub called "Space". What was happening is that folks were coming and going, after partying all night, right in the center of downtown!

I had been away for far too long. The transformation was complete. Downtown Miami was no longer a ghost town and Eastward Ho! is no longer a hypothetical movement. People are living and working and partying in downtown Miami.... and they are doing

so safely at all hours of the night!

While developers were also busy tearing down old properties, the loft revolution grew stronger in places like trendy Los Angeles, Venice Beach CA, and of course New York where it was always a staple.

With more folks partying now in downtown, there was more interest in even considering it a great place to possibly live. After a decade or two of commuting (i'm speaking of Miami) folks got tired of the ensuing and escalating "parking lot" that existed on major highways.

My own father clocked nearly an hour and 15 minutes each way to and from work. My brother got a job downtown and had to leave as early as 6am to get to work without getting eaten up alive by traffic!

Ditto Atlanta, where suburbs are just rampant. Where 50 miles is still considered commuting distance! I think people just had had enough. The market boomed and now it's unheard of or very tricky to get a good deal on an old warehouse or building or land even to convert to a loft or build a new condo.

But there are still great deals. If ya know where to find them. And that is where the great chase comes to play. Marji and I went to Rome, GA in the hopes of beating people to the punch or at least before the masses show up and the prices sky-rocket.

Down Broad Avenue, we saw circa 1890 buildings abandoned. Some had storefronts, others gutted. But a few were being snatched up here and there. There was a good speckling of real estate signs suggesting a beginning to the movement there. But it's a gamble, one that can go either way.

Tomorrow's continuation will have the rest of the story.

Cesar Becerra
Rome, GA

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19 Jan 2006

Miami Florida, United States - Culinary Graduation Day and Playing Cheapass Board Game at Ori's Home on Gilbert Street in Atlanta.

There should be a plaque on the door of Ori's lovely little bungalow that reads "Cesar Slept Here... Lots of times!" Welcome to one of my many home away from well no home that I have scattered about the nation.

After almost 7 years of constant travel (51,000 mile - 50 state road trip in 99, 2,000 mile Appalachian Trail Hike in 2001/02 and the first 1,600 miles of the World Walk from Key West to Kentucky) I have slowly amassed an amazing underground of homes that take me in where I can think, reflect, rest, write, party, cook, etc...

One of the key places that I have hung out on many an occasion has been Ori's home near the Inman Park and Five Points communities of Atlanta. I have been boomeranging back and forth here as I crossed the great state of Georgia. I have lost count of how many times I've been here. It's sorta like home.

I met Ori through the couchsurfing.com website where travellers are introduced to hosts. It's one of these "never leave home without it" type nomadic must haves.

Ori, an incredibly amazing friend (I no longer really consider her a couch surf host) is one of the coolest, quirkiest people I know. And the quirky part I assure you is a compliment of the highest order in my book.

She is first and foremost an artist. Particularly she has an incredibly keen eye for art, design and a world of keen items (I'm gonna fall short of calling them tchotchkes) that fill her home in such a way to create just the right bohemian

ballance i've ever seen.

Though its gonna sound like a mish-mash of stuff. Ori is the only person that can bring together the following and make it seem you are in another world;

Floating just around the kitchen is a framed picture of Jackie and John Kennedy, carved and hand painted wooden flowers, an old/worn paint peeling cabinet, an old step stool from the 60's, amazing wine bottles and glass vessels of all sizes and shapes including one with a golden monkey embossed on the glass, tibeten hanging candle holders, and a refrigerator with an amazing collection of magnet, posters, postcards and evn finger pupets of Dali, Frida Khalo and Diego Rivera!

In the living room you have a day bed with what looks like a thousand pillows, a depression era looking antique lamp, a rainbow colored hula hoop, Hundreds if not thousands of amazing records, CD's all of which were chosen for either their unique musical heritage or cool - ass retro design work.

There are candles and budas. Paintings of all varieties. Long flowing fabrics of all kinds. Funky chairs ranging from an ornate rod-iron victorian to a 50's styled school chair. my favorite is this wooden adirondack lookin one with a Japanese motif runner flowing down the middle.

But it all works. It all just fits like a Hollywood set or a Broadway Production designers masterpiece. When i enter this world, i feel like its playtime again. I'm a kid, putting on costumes and acting out a scene. The world of the now melts into a fantasy-land. My mind can wander as the days slip by.

I do alot of my best writing here. Thinking as well. Many a strategy was thought of here as i planned my trajectory through Georgia and Tennessee.

the highlight of each stay is when Ori drags me out to a local bar or concert hall to see a new or cool band play a gig. I say drag, cuz usually i'm a bit hesitant. I was not much into the live music scene...until i met Ori. She seems to have the pulse on the music world. And she is seldom wrong.

I've been known to enter worlds that even i as a wacky worldwalkin nomad felt very foreign in. Music that i otherwize never would have listened to, i have fallen in love with. I have danced to 7am at nearby warehouse parties, jammed to bands playing inside venues who's entrance way resembled a giant skull, and met the most unique, intelectual, wacky people i've ever been exposed to. And on ocassion i have cooked for many of her friends.

Last night i got to unveil the latest in my culinary cuban arsenal that now includes 4 of my mothers signature dishes. I had made this dish only one other time and that was with my mom supervizing, so understandably, i was really nervous.

With 7 guests to cook for and Ori's bragging about my kitchen prowess the pressure was on. I started early, dolling up and tidying the living room and kitchen. Ori leads a pretty busy life working an assortment of jobs that range from social work to trade show logistics to bartending to even ongoing on-line courses. All the while she is converting her basement into an apartment she can rent out. Its a major job so the place is under constant construction. I always like to lend a helping hand.

So for example today, i cleaned up her yard a bit, took little dog Linda (pronounced Leenda) for a walk, cleaned the entire kitchen, reorganized the living room, moved boxes and tools and vacuum cleaners this way and that. By 5 when she arrived, the place was ready for the party.

The dish i made was called Cuban Shrimp Creole. It always looked pretty difficult to make. but i pulled it off. Its a soupy, tomatoey, gumbo like dish served over a bed of rice. It practically dissapeared as the guests sipped wine, swapped stories and settled in to play a "cheapass" board game called "Deadwood."

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I mean it when i say Cheapass. Literally, that is the name and philosophy of the company (www.cheapass.com) who produces this series of dozens of board games that minimize on the cost of each game thru...u guessed it...cheapass, photocopied and pieced together playing board and absolutely no dice or pieces of any kind included in the envelope (thats right no box here, just a cheapass envelope).

We laughed at the companies printed philosophy which includes this gem: "We here at Cheapass Games are aware of two basic facts about games; they cost too much, and they are, at some level, all the same. If u ignore the clever shapes they come in, the cheap little plastic pawns are an interchangeable part of most of the board games in your house. So are the dice, the money, the counters, and just about every disposable spare part. These parts can account for as much as 75% of a game's production cost, and that gets handed to you."

Well one thing is not interchangeable in my life and that is my friendship with folks like Ori a. Who else will get up at 2am to pick you up at the Greyhound Station? Expose you to new music? Give ya a home to rest up time and time again?

Thanks Ori a. Once again. I am forever grateful.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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18 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Champaign Campaign in an "Atmosphere" of friends. The heavy french accent almost made me abandon plans to crash a wine and champaign tasting event in Northern Atlanta. I quote "Drsers noot any mure space e toonight for ze wine tasting..wee are booked, sury!"

Normally i hear this and run. I am not one for hoidy-toity places, but i figured i might not see some of my friends if i didn't go and besides i was half invited anyway. So i took a risk and went none-the-less.

The fact that by the end of the night we were all raising a ruckus in the back room long after the champaign tasting had ended totally stripped away the thinly veiled veneer of any of us being true afflictionados!

My friend Chris whispered to me as i arrived "i dont even like champaign!" Thus another interesting night unfolded in Atlanta, a sort of home away from home city i've become quite fond of. Besides i wanted to continue the beautiful process of seeing new friends morph into just "plain ole friends" . Which is really why we were all there; just to hang with friends.

Hey, with this crowd, any excuse will do.

Introduced to all by my ever shrinking and tall as a lightpole pal Marji (Couch surf host, downsizer and former employer for her estate sale and move) who has just come back from a monthlong trip to Europe... there was... Scott, swashbuckling and astute owner of an Atlanta gallery, Bridget ("Bridge" we call her), a real estate agent and social wonder, John, a financial manager and the aforementioned Chris, a business owner/new art collector who works alongsi de Marji, who i still cant explain what she and Chris do, but they do it really well.

In any case, i sorta surprized them all by popping in unannounced. I like to do that sometimes. Marji had let me know they'd be there so i popped on a Metro bus from my perch at friend/couch surf host Ori a's home and zipped to the Marta Station (overground subway system in Atlanta). Once at the Lindburgh stop i began a mile and a half walk to Atmosphere, a "Chic French Quisine" restaurant just north of the

city.

Its an old home, converted to restaurant, complete with an intact and very much alive and crackling fireplace, window dressings and arched rooms intact as if all that was missing was the living room furniture.

Instaed there is a restaurant. And in the main room were 12 guests enjoying a champaign and wine tasting presentation along side appetizers that went with each wine. As i had arrived late and was never officially on their list, i ordered a diet coke at the bar but kept my eyes and ears "peeled" (whatever the hell that means) on the entire nights proceedings.

Now i would like to begin with saying that my following assesment of this "tasting" ritual is coming from a person that doesnt drink at all. So i'm biased a bit or even at a disadvantage journalistically speaking.

Two nicely dressed "hosts" would every few minutes or so pop in once a new menu item was plopped down and proceed to pop open a new bottle and wax poetically about its origins, history, texture, blah, blah, blah, blah bla...well u know that type of speak.

As i am no expert, i will give u some soundbites; "On this lovely specimen you will notice that the bubbles don't agrevate the mouth" and "thus one has a meaty taste to it, sort of a Barnyard flavor to it" and "this variety is the least spirited one" or "the bright freshness to it comes from its ability to delight but not overwhelm your meal"

What? Can u say that in english. Now i know i'm poking fun and that serious "tasters" can tell the difference between a "Brigetto Grape" and one from say the "Northwestern Piedmont section of Italy" but i cant and luckily later in the evening while we retired to another table, the rest of my friends divulged the truth; that they really just care about the taste, the rest is interesting, but it sometimes goes in one ear, out the other.

So send in the wine. And with it, great conversation. Which thanks to John's interesting tale about how he now is seeing his ex-frat-house-buddy's girlfriend (scandalous right!) we all turned to the scintilating and ongoing interest in how people date (or as the youngin are puttin it; "hook-up") in this day and age.

Of course the wine didn't hurt loosening the details from otherwize discreet professionals. We ran the gammut that evening leading me once again to think of publishing an anonymous blog on just these sort of real life (yes, stranger than fiction) tales about chasing tale (male or female) and what to do with it when u catch up to it.

Without attaching names to scenarios we heard copious details on long distance relationships, hard to get crumudgeon-like guy behavior, oscar award winning princesses who hid her cocaine addiction well, dating on the internet, the cloud theory and how it makes us blind to obvious red flags, when a couch and a fake fatigue-spell can plow the way for a serious relationship...and many more.

The "dance" is what i call it. That elusive and mysterious pull and tug that accompanies all connections between two people no matter which gender is connecting with another.

Which is really the point of it all. Connection. Whether it be slow and steady over time or quick and lightening fast, assisted by the same bubbly flowing that night.

I think i will begin it. Consider it done. U will not know who's story is who - to protect its contributors of course. It will be brutally honest, passionate, explicit at times, but it will be the story of "connecting" in the new millennium.

Look for it soon. I'm tired of procrastinating on this idea. It seems like everyone

is telling me stories right and left. So its time to let em loose.

Any and all can start by submitting an overview or synopsis. If we like it. Yes there will be a small committee. We'll choose it, interview u and write it up on the blog soon to be launched. For now send all considerations to thedancewedance@yahoo.com

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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15 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Getting around; Public Transportation and Airport Overnights.

I'm strange so no ones gonna argue with that. No. Actually i'm unique. "I live a unique lifestyle", i'm trying to remember to say when i catch my self saying "i'm weird", but truth be told, its just a different way i live my life. But it really extends to all aspects of my life. Very few things are normal.

Take for instance how i got out of Miami. OK. Normal people would book a flight and fly out. maybe just drive out. Not me. Miami to Atlanta is another opportunity for adventure. In all, it took 3 cars, one airport overnight, one Amtrak train, one hurried cab ride, one Greyhound Bus and one generous lift from my Atlanta buddy Ori a.

Confused....OK, here is how and more important...why? A few days before i left Miami i perused web sites of different travel providers to see what was interesting, cheap and timely to travel on. Amtrak won. With a AAA card, i got an unbeatable \$54 ticket from Miami to Savannah. 850 miles for like a penny and a half a mile!

But first, how to get there without bothering anybody at a God awful 6:30 in the morning! If anybody knows Miami, they know two things; that it takes one hour to get anywhere by car and u don't want to be caught dead on a Miami highway anytime during morning rush hour.

And if anybody knows me, knows that i do not like bothering anybody unnecessarily. Which is why, though they'd love to pick me up wherever i arrive, i just let my family know i will show up at their door when i do. I'll take tri-rail (commuter train), Metro Rail (our over ground subway mass transit system) and buses to get to and from my parent's Kendall, FL home. It infuriates them a bit, maybe more like puzzles them....probably cuz they look down on public transportation or at least it is a mystery to them.

So what to do in a situation where there is no way to easily get to an area of town nearly 25 miles away at a time in the morning that will severely mess up someones entire nerves - much less their day? The airport! That's what! That's right. After traveling for so many years I have come to learn that the airport in any major city is (or should be) the grand hub of mass transportation. And planes are only the begi nni ng.

For years I have been using the airport as a rest stop or kill-time center to just;

Chill before a flight.

Arrive the night before an early morning 5am take-off.

Positioning center to take off on free shuttles to Greyhound, Amtrak, Tri-rail, etc. Make shift hotel if I get in too late to catch a shuttle or bus to a hotel or hostel.

This might all seem insane but to me, it is a great way to entertain myself, read, work or just think. In my opinion, there is an energy about being in a place where thousands of people are about to embark on thousands of different journeys around the world. There is a zen like calm at 3am when the cleaning staff is perusing the corridors with their whirring \$6,000 vacuuming zambini's.

So I asked my parents to just drop me off at the airport. To which they asked. "Oh, you flying out?" I said no, I'm going by train on Amtrak. (puzzled look as they finished their dinner) "Wait a minute, then if ur going on train, why do you want to go to the airport?" Well I say, "do you want me to get u up at 4am?" Their faces scrunch. "I thought, so, don't worry about the why, just know I need to get to the airport to catch a free 5am shuttle to tri rail. (Tri-rail takes u from Miami to West Palm Beach, it's a commuter train) This puzzles them even more. "Are u going to Atlanta by Tri-rail?" No mom, no dad, that gets me to Hialeah, which then is next to Amtrak. "Oh, then yu take Amtrak to Atlanta."

Well, here is where they give up and see my life as unnecessarily complex.

"Actually, my train goes to Savannah!" WHAT. Then how are u getting over to Atlanta. "Greyhound" I say. By this time, they give up trying to understand it and just say "we'll take u to the airport!" and I say... "thank you"

Basically I love taking a combination of public transportation opportunities to one place, so that I may know how to get around without a car. My needing a lift to the airport is rare. Generally I walk out of their house and just take the bus to where I need to go. But this was an early morning logistical thingie, not a problem in cities like New York, but Miami has still not become a truly 24 hour city until it has those options at all hours of the day.

I now know - without having to consult any map or schedule...how to get in and out of the following major cities using Public Transportation; Miami, New York, Boston, Atlanta, Washington D.C., Los Angeles. It feels good both not to have to rely on a car or bother anybody...unless truly it warrants a lift at an odd hour.

Cesar Becerra
Atlanta, GA

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14 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - 2.5 minute ride; Lisa Kron's "slide show" remembers "Papa" and helps me understand my parents a wee bit more.

I have been a holocaust scholar if u will for many years. I'm not saying expert but scholar is no understatement.

I have written award winning essays, interviewed and met with survivors, expressed my opinion in paintings (Submission of the Mind) that now hang in a synagogue on Kendall Drive and been on countless occasions to the National Holocaust museum in DC and have seen many of their rotating new exhibits (not just the main permanent one).

I simply devour and still am interested in this subject and Jewish culture as a whole for many years.

I have also seen several plays, such as two from the perspective of Anne Frank, a play called I never Saw another Butterfly and a few more that escape my mind. This

weekend I got to see a new play by Lisa Kron called 2.5 Minute Ride.

2.5 is the story of Lisa Kron, a Jewish-Lesbian who is trying to put into perspective the past, present and future.... aren't we all.

I was invited by my good friend Kris Merrill, a non-Jew who shares a similar fascination and interest into all things Jewish. We are still at loss as to why we are so enamored by Jewish culture and in particular Jewish people. Kris was invited by friend and artistic director Richard Jay Simon who has been at the Helm of Mosaic Theatre for nearly 5 seasons.

As I think about it a little more, let me just drop a few examples of how present they are and have been in my lives.

Hmmmm, my first girlfriend was Jewish, my first boss was Jewish, my current boss is Jewish, most of my mobile DJ-ing gigs when I was in high school/college were Jewish formals, bat/bar mitzphas etc. (excuse the spelling, obviously I'm not Jewish) my funniest friends are Jewish, funniest TV shows like Seinfeld and Curb your Enthusiasm are written and acted in by Jewish people.

Well its not scientific evidence of course but it just illustrates a continuous interest in that culture. But what is it? Can there be a highly passionate, powerful tug (more than normal, bordering on obsession) into a world that is not yours? And if so, what does that mean?

My take on 2.5, is that there is a massive hole that is trying to be filled by Ms. Kron. The play uses an abstract slide show format to illustrate Kron's life story, family history and most cherished family moments. All the while weaving in a trip to visit the infamous and harsh Auschwitz Concentration (Death) Camp.

Without giving away the play (it is running at the American Heritage Center for the Arts in Plantation till Jan 29th, see www.mosaictheatre.com), I believed it to be a powerful statement on where exactly can one physically be geographically speaking in order to be understood, found or absurdly bound to other people u think drive you crazy.

Now although I can't say that I could possibly make a direct link to The Holocaust and my family's loss in having to leave Cuba, (there is no comparison) there is at the core conceptually the feelings and history of loss that I know has played a major role in my family's and culture's outlook on the world and in particular the way they act and exist in current day to day life.

I feel very confident that if a particular, group, family or culture experiences an abrupt change in their reality, (particularly one as harsh as the Holocaust or pushed out of a country as was the case in Cuba) then that family will tend to hold on tight to their new reality. Fearing greatly a repeat of the past whether warranted or not.

I think for my family/culture it has come in the form of a hyper-critical fear of what can happen out away from the elusive safety of the Miami-zone! Generally, Cuban-American kids are not sent off to college, they usually do not sleep over a friends home, they will usually have cerfews etc... All of which i experienced. And to a great degree it has shaped my wanderlust considerably.

And it is not necessarily my particular generation. Though some Cubans have less loose the reigns a bit, i know a Cuban family who's son is getting ready to think about what colleges to go to and all family members including the sister (just so u dont see this as a strictly parent thing) are nervous wrecks about the prospect of him leaving home. To the point of eloquent and elaborate tales of why staying in Miami would be soooo much better.

Years ago, i had the privilege of meeting and being befriended by Budd Schulberg, the oscar winning screenwriter of "On the Waterfront" and his wife Betsy, and their two kids. Never had i seen such a mirror image of my Cuban family as with this amazingly tight knit Jewish family.

Throughout a day in the Everglades (Budd had written a movie called Wind Across the Everglades - starring Christopher Plummer and Gypsy Rose Lee) i witnessed all the classic Cuban examples of overprotectiveness and mothering but in this tightly knit Jewish family.

I could see the love mind you but i could also sense the kids wanting to shrug off some of the babying, the over-kill on safety concerns....i saw myself....wanting to test waters out for myself....see if indeed the world was bad or was it all paranoia.

Ms. Kron's play made me think of alot of things relating to my family. On one powerful moment of the play, Kron freaks out and has a meltdown that her father's glasses were left behind in a section of Auschwitz. She did not want a part of him to be left behind in a place where he almost perished and where so much hate was thrust upon him, his family and his people.

And yet it dawned on Kron that in that very place, seeing her father in the very place that gave birth to fears tranfered later onto her.....she came to know him best. It had defined him so much that until she saw him in that context.....she really never knew him as clearly as she did at that moment.

I thought about my dad (and mom) and wondered if i will ever really know them till i see them one day revisit Cuba, the land of great and terrible memories. A place that gave birth to the fears (though i dont think they will ever see it this way) that marked their future outlooks.

Come to think of it, i think the play made me understand my own parents better. At least cut them some slack. For after all, were they not as protective as far as the bigger, badder, world was concerned....i might not have been as curious to see and wander as i do today.

Cesar Becerra
Plantation, FL (Broward County - naer Ft. Lauderdale)

Note; I was able to look into this feeling/theory further while interviewing a cousin that just escaped Cuba a month ago. Her dramatic life-risking story will be my next major essay at www.planetcesar.blogspot.com

14 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - A Hurricane of Help; Post Disaster Relief - Our national reality buffer.

I am off, leaving Miami today and will be in Atlanta by tomorrow. Am making a final decision as to go Greyhound or Amtrak at the last second so soon you will find out which one. I have already regaled yu of my love/lust for Greyhound Travel so, I think it will be the train for me this time.

But as I leave the city I have been wanting to reflect on the few hurricanes that have hit it hard. When I began coming back to Miami after a long 6 months (this was back in November for Turkey day) away the place looked like Beirut; trees stripped of leaves, concrete walls down, roofs looked as they had been bombed. In short, a war zone!

It was an ugly site. I let many people know my raw reactions; that of the fact that "it is what u get for building in such a fragile zone!" I have always believed that in a sense our hyper-development leads to a further complication in a post natural disaster cleanup.

We saw that in New Orleans, we've seen that in South Florida.

Can these disasters be considerably worse than they really seem? Is it possible one day to report on and separate the natural and human-based tragedy and that of the replaceable man-made physical infrastructure destruction? For some reason, this country lives in a dream world where we can't fathom our stuff being taken away, our material items stripped. We have to have insurance for everything! We feel we have the right to never lose anything, and more importantly...if we do... it has to be replaced!

This is not the case in other parts of the world. When the Tsunami hit parts of Asia. The first and foremost issue was human based tragedy, sickness etc...Here, reporters followed FEMA folks, insurance reps and blasted info on how to apply for re-building funds.

There are places on this planet where home and flood insurance aren't even a concept much less a reality. I know that in a certain respect some would say we live in the best country on earth, and in many respects I agree, but perhaps we are hyper-insulated from dealing with reality. In other words, do all of us need to be bailed out, and if so, who gets bailed?

I know several people who even applied for those credit card-based food stamps that can be used anywhere and bought high end cheeses and wines and proceeded to have a post hurricane party. Just... cuz they could.

Course there is always going to be abuses of the system. So maybe that is not a good example, but it illustrates just how much we have here. Sadly, imagine how much more we can help out if the abuses are cut down, just how much more we can put towards other needed programs (like education) if we draw a hard line in the sand and put a stop to the very development that adds to the disaster and logistical challenge that comes with a post storm environment.

Again, my angle in having less or nothing as a form of being at least not part of the problem... is probably too radical. We all can't be nomads. But can we build in certain locations and not others (that would cut down on damage)?

Can we build smaller and tougher, instead of bigger and more fragile (like the homes found in Guam where even the roof is rod-iron enforced poured concrete)? Can we consume less, so the loss doesn't give us a false sense of a type of loss that is expendable (material loss is way different than human loss).

Come to think of it, maybe the hurricanes weren't too bad after all if you look at it from that point of view. I think only a handful of people died. Two in the last one. Folks, that is a miracle compared to when in 1935 in the Labor Day storm that hit the Keys, nearly 300 people lost their lives. 300!

That is a tragedy!

Cesar Becerra
Kendall, FL (South Dade County - Miami)

Note: It's the train. Just got my tickets, I leave Monday morning.

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13 Jan 2006

Miami Florida, United States - A new Miami; Accepting it for what it is, not what it could be.

I'm inside the waiting area of my uncle's mechanic shop, Banner Tire of Westchester. It is a place I know well. It's located at the corner of SW 8th street and 87th Avenue, but if you're from here you simply say "Calle Ocho y la ochenta-siete". This is Cuban country, or it used to be (now it's a melting pot of all sorts-a immigrant groups). I've brought in my mom's minivan for a wheel alignment. It's the least I

can do to help out. It will take a while and my parents deserve to take some hours off instead of spending them watching wheels get aligned.

Years ago, as a kid, I spent many at summer day here since I used to spend most of my time with my cousin Mike, who now is married with kids etc.... We used to climb up the tire stacks, look for flats, grab Cuban sandwiches and Cuban coffee for everyone, and now and then I'd witness my kind-hearted uncle Oscar (we always called him Napo) turn into a hellion in a pinstriped mechanic's shirt...chew up some employee for being lazy, screwing up on the job or handle the stress of a busy corner garage that can be backed up for hours with agitated and hurried car owners.

I don't see too much of my cousins any more. It seems like the early memories of seeing them all the time has morphed into the brutal reality that with this busier more fast paced time, I will be lucky to see them once or twice a year.

Of course my sister and bother see them more than I since they live here, but not by much. Should we feel guilty for not connecting with them as often? Is this just simply a new reality of modern day life, even among tight knit immigrant group as us Cubans?

Next to me is a Spanish Language TV show blaring with a magnanimous and hyper-excited host surrounded by scantily-clad women on a beach somewhere. Bikinis jangling, butts jiggling... Miami is a city that lets it all hang out. You can never call it an uptight city. I think the sun cooks any of that away. Maybe it has something also to do with the fact that its January 13th and I am in a t-shirt and shorts... sweating!

As I was last night at a Salsa Lounge/Club called Tapas y Tintas on Hispanola Way on South Beach with fellow co-worker and tour guide Diana Beltran and her Hotel Sofitel friends Vince and Nyla. We arrived late around 1am and did not stop dancing till 4:30am. An incredible band began the night with rotating singers that seemed to come out of nowhere to take the mic.

As they jammed, more and more tables and chairs were removed from the main floor and the people took over dancing, some groups couldn't wait till the furniture moved and it seemed like we were all parasites descending on the place to a point in the night that only heads and bodies could be seen. Two great examples of this city's laid back attitude and always in flux reality.

I used to not like that very much I must admit. As a perfectionist and Virgo to boot, everything had to be kept in great order. But since I've become a full time traveler I have become quite comfortable with understanding (even celebrating and being in total awe) chaos and constant change. Course too much, for too long, can disturb yur journey. Similar to the alignment being worked on the minivan, every now and then a person must re-align their lives. Take a break, collect all marbles, find a new zen-like neutrality and then go forth with the voyage. Ironically, I am starting to feel like Miami can be one of those cities for me to recharge. It is as surprising to me as my new love for my once fiercely hated New York City.

I still have pangs about coming back to Miami, more so on the holidays, but its going away. I have repeatedly stated to many that I have a love/hate relationship with this city. The love is family, weather, friends of course. The hate is what most of the city stands for; materialism, development, loud-living, congestion etc. . But slowly its subsiding, slowly I'm coming to grips with its ebb and flow.

Though I don't always agree, I have to come to grips with the fact that it is no longer my home and I should treat it as I treat any other city I visit; just accept it for what its worth, warts and all. I think my critical angle on the city of my birth is that at one point I was sort of on the front lines in the battle to save it from progress. I was a tour guide and preservationist for years before my traveling days.

Most if not all of those parks and historical sites i worked at had some sort of

element of old battling the new. It is a battle that I feel is a losing one. With the new winning out. But alas, perhaps the new will one day be the new "old". Hmm, with that tack I can maybe allow myself to one day embrace Miami for what it is rather than for what it could have been. Accepting reality, though not highly regarded in the preservation community can be a freeing feeling.

Cesar Becerra
Westchester, Dade County (West Miami)

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12 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Grizzly Man; Living your conviction - how far is too far.

Sometimes i wonder if i take unnecessary risks. I mean life is a risk sure, but how much is too much? I sometimes have to walk on side of highways (not major ones mind u, it is illegal to walk on interstates) but small yet busy ones.

I generally (most of the time) am on country lanes or a dirt roads, but to piece them together sometimes (to transfer from one small road to another i want to get on) i have to walk a few miles on a semi-busy small highway. Facing traffic, walking on the left side of the road, i forge on, keeping a keen eye on the cars, making sure they all see me. I've never had an incident (obviously) or a close call. But i wont say its the safest thing in the world to do. But yet i do so.

What makes us dream big? And in doing so, why do some people feel hell bent to do whatever it takes to fulfill a dream, protect a dream, risk all to keep the dream alive?

Enter the life story and life lesson of Timothy Treadwell, the guy who got eaten (along with his girlfriend) by a giant Grizzly Bear. Whoops excuse me that's pretty redundant - all Grizzlies are giant.

Yes the same "Timmy" Treadwell of the Werner Hertzog documentary Grizzly Man. Though its a story about a man and his devotion to living in harmony in the wilds of Alaska - right smack in bear territory - it is also the story and tale of living on life's purpose.

Now though it might not be my dream to live with the bears and no matter how much of a nut you think this guy might be - the core of the message is pretty powerful; are u living your dream?

Now before u think i'm road walking across this country of ours, know that most of my days are spent on the sides of corn fields, next to abandoned rail road tracks, inside federally protected preserves, red clay roads next to horses and cows. In other words, i would only rate a small percentage of my total experience as risky. But it poses a question. Do you know where the line is drawn between risks you are willing to take to make ur dream come true and at what moment do you consider it not worth it?

There were moments of Timothy Treadwell's life where danger was near. A bear getting a bit too curious. A hungry bear - well, getting hungry. During those times, Timothy would raise his arms up high, lunge forward and move his arm in a offensive punching-like movement and yell....."dont you dare, back off."

Apparently - and the reason i think Grizzly Man is such an important lesson as a film - Timothy Treadwell had no line. It was all worth it. Now as comendable as that might seem, i also see it as incredibly stupid. There are risks even i am not willing to take; walking on a dangerous stretch of road at night, walking in the dead of winter unless i can stay in a warm hotel room each night, walking in the woods without telling someone where i was, etc...

I will also add small things like - as great as it was to be ultra jedi-like

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lightweight hiker this summer - i will walk now with plenty of water. It will weigh me down, but the risk of me damaging my kidney again with a kidney stone is just not worth it. I got into major trouble by not drinking enough water this past summer and hiking in the heat of the day - dehydrated and not knowing it.

And i have to remind myself, though its not death by bear, i can get myself into trouble if i dont take care of myself. Which is the difference between Timothy and i, i am willing to change a conviction (walk with almost no weight or as little weight as possible - and who needs water) instead of thumbing my nose at it. i.e. Timothy's notion that a bear would never harm him so he'd continue getting closer, petting cubs, swimming with them.

But it is an inspiring tale and in the end i'd have to put Timmy on my list of "admi red individuals" (remember i admire Everest Climbers but i'm never doing Everest!) that i think about and feel part of a small family of adventurers, dreamers and (though Timmy died) doers.

What's your dream? Are u living your life's purpose? If so, do you know the extent to which you will go to make it come true? And how far is too far?

Cesar Becerra
Miami, FL

NOTE; I would love to share some of ur responses one day, so e-mail me your thoughts cesarwal ks@yahoo.com

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11 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - In Constant Flux; A life on the road - Nomadic Honesty

My mother is elated i'm in town. For a few days she can pretend i live a normal life. Yesterday i learned how to cook the forth cuban dish i have learned from her. It is a cuban shrimp creole dish that is out of this world. And like the life i lead, it seemed incredibly complex to make but in reality a shear breeze. And in the end - a total delight to devour!

Incredibly Complex;

There is a lot of chopping, prep work, even sauteing, de-vaining and pureeing. This is not yur one minute rice recipe.

My life takes me from countless cities to walking in the middle of nowhere. Camping in farm fields to staying in 5 star hotels. Being arrested to being welcomed by every townfolk with open arms. I have a presence on 5 web sites and i employ (though very part time) an assitant in Chattanooga. My stuff is in St. Louis, Los Angeles, Chattanooga and Miami. My taxes are a year late & my forward progress is always in limbo. I carry no cell phone and own no car. I meet new people each day. I wake up each and every day with a great purpose and conviction but with a heavy conscious that i fit in nowhere. And yet i also feel i am as happy as i could possibly be.

So that is the incredibly complex part of making this cuban shrimp dish and the makings of a life of a nomad.

Shear Breeze;

There comes a moment when all is assembled with the peppers, onions, puree-ing it all...where the cooking wine is at hand, and the shrimps are all ready. And literally when it all comes together, u just plo p it into one pan and turn up the heat.

The shear breeze of my life is just about every moment. When i am travelling to visit friends or walking to slowly walk around the world i am on my own time table.

I am never rushed. The weather is always perfect (in the sense that I don't ever see bad weather as bad) and the places always new, a delight to discover and an amazement to my mind. I am growing each day whether I am walking on a highway or in the streets of Boston or New York. The journey melts and becomes every moment of every day. I am filled with curiosity, intellect and challenged by it all.

Total Delight to Devour:

Well, there is nothing to do now with that shrimp dish than devour it. As is the case with each day of my life. Devour, accept, enjoy it for all its worth. The two become one. The dish is but a moment in the trip. The bite into a pink shrimp is a step on a country lane.

Cesar Becerra
Miami, FL

Special note; For those that have just joined or just met me or are confused that since I call myself a worldwalker, what exactly am I doing not really walking. The answer is simply that I have now walked 1,600 miles from Key West to Kentucky and I am taking time off thru the winter. I may or may not get back on the actual linear walk till after winter due to my understanding and conviction of my self described notion of journeying called "thorough-hiking" or "thorough-walking" which is the hike a lighter, slower more inquisitive way.

Adding to that is the fact that I see no difference (but I respect that others do) from my walk when I'm actually walking than that when I'm working or visiting friends or randomly going off to other places. It is simply the journey in all its forms that I began in Key West on Jan 4th, 2004 and all that I do till I get around the world....whether or not I'm on the worldwalk route itself or not. In other words it's all the world walk. There is no pressure to rush or match another's view of what a journey should be. Also part of this journey is to have and keep up the means of continuing on the journey and sometimes that means working (my tour leading position with Educational Field Trips and my estate sales/moving concierge stints as well as countless other opportunities that come my way). For example in Boston last week I was protecting and defending my worldwalk's financial health by dealing with a hospital bill and am in town in Miami dealing with a long standing issue with some valuable evidence I own that continues to be fought over for an environmental lawsuit.

As for the first few hundred miles...and if you have enjoyed my journals so far, I have written a special 200 page spiral bound book called "Baby Steps" that can be ordered the World Walk Office at three zero five, tripple four, nineteen thirty two. The book chronicles the first 400 miles of the journey plus explores the forces that forged my nomadic life.

But make no mistake, a process is being developed now so that when I get back on the walk - whether I am around a computer/internet or not, that you receive daily updates of my journey.

And the last component as to why I'm moving around so much now is that I am establishing a new office (in Chattanooga, TN), training a new assistant (Becky Bridges) and phasing out the former World Walk office in St. Louis.

Call it Spring Cleaning in Winter! All meant to fortify the Worldwalk with a great infrastructure to see its successful forward progress in the future.

Thanks, and keep enjoying all these great "exit ramps" as I like to define my adventures.

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10 Jan 2006
Miami Florida, United States - Internet brings people together; Salmon Dinner Party,
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West Miami, Florida

Its like that explanation of the atomic bomb i cant quite remember from my high school science teacher. Something about atoms splitting and colliding into each other. Then BOOM!

Well that is the best way i can conjure up to explain how i feel about how the internet has connected us with new friends that we might not have ever met.

Tonight was a great example. I was wondering how to wrap up such a nice evening. I could have angled it very guy-like and tell ya, i was in a sea of women. Well in the company of 4 beautiful ladies. Which was true. But those that know i'm not ur typical guy would not have bought it.

Or...I could have talked about dinner parties in general. How to best keep a conversation going. What u should bring to one if invited. Wine or cheese? Maybe a desert. But i thought - i dont really ever know what to bring, and i dont ever want to be invited to one of those formal messes anyway.

No. I made a wize assesment at why tonight was special aside from the amazing salmon, sciltilating conversation and explicit re-enactment of modern hip hop dancing (more on that later) by an unlikely but astute anthropologist; and that is...that everybody in the room was brought together thru the clever use of the internet.

Of course, Kris had something to do with that too. Remember Kris from Couch Surfing and Kris, who let me party with MeMe her amazingly nimble and party-animal grandma! That Kris. Well let me amend a wee bit further. Because of Kris AND the internet, we all got to experience a dinner party that would have been impossible to assemble before our personal computing days.

Here is the breakdown. First the cast; Kris (the host and Miami based FIU grad that is about to travel big time to Australia and New Zealand), friend Mara (Health care professional that lives in Ft. Lauderdale but is originally from Minneapolis, WI) friend Laura (long time Kendall, FL resident that is an avid rock-climber) and friend and foreign traveller Yoa (singer who is new in town visiting from Iceland - yes i said Iceland) and then little ole me (well u know bout me, Miami an, worldwalker, nomad, nut!).

OK, now here is the connection. Stay with me. I met Kris online thru our connection on Couch Surfing and our wize use of Craigslist. Kris met Laura thru Craigslist when posting a need for a rock climbing partner. Mara met Kris as well on Craigslist. And Yoa reached out to Kris via the Couch Surfing site when she flew from Iceland to the states and was in need of a place to stay while exploring Miami.

Now i forgot to hear about how the rest were invited but i'll bet cha ten dimes to the donut that it went a bit like my invitation went; COMPLETELY thru e-mail, Instant messaging and that of course all exists thanks to the Internet.

And now...

i know a transplant from Wisconsin who wears cool -ass cargo pants (i'm jealous really - i have a weakness for nomadic like pants)

and

I know a rock climber who is a 5th generation Floridian (who really is inspiring me to climb walls soon).

and

I know an Icelandic gal (who sings and has been to Bob Marley's family home and who's sister was the former Miss Iceland) who consequently showed us all what the damn place looks like. Think Mars and swap ice burgs for the red rocks.....

and of course all of this cuz i posted a profile on the web about my wacky adventure and lifestyle lookin for new friends who shared a similar outlook.

The internet; a new social order. And a way to order up new social gatherings. No telling what other "atomic bomb" ricocheting offshoots this night will bring. But i say bring it on.

Cesar Becerra
Mi ami , FL

Extra note; I failed to mention Kris' fat cat (her words not mine) who as she leaves town soon will be in need of a new owner or dedicated pet sitter. Kris, as u can imagine will not be running to kinkos or office depot to make posters to put up around town. Nope, she has already posted an ad on the... (u guessed it) the INTERNET for just such a person!

Extra Extra note on Yoa's keen observation of our hip hop, booty shaking moves on the dance floor.

"Its as if the girls butts are wanting to lick the ground!"

Now i'm not gonna say this defined the evening's conversation caliber, but it will illustrate that u just had to be there to see the charade-like presentation illustrating her point. So c'mon, have some fun, get on the net, have a party! If so, do invite me.

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8 Jan 2006

mi ami florida, United States - Boston Wrap-up; Last 24 hours in Beantown.

My last day in Boston before a leave the chilly weather behind me for some fun and (business) in the sun - i'm heading to Mi ami tomorrow - was a busy one.

I'll begin with 12:01am, where i and my new friend, CouchSurf Host Manar were dancing to Hip Hop and Regee-TON (spanish hip hop with a Salsa like flair) at Club Hong Kong.

We had been there nearly two hours when a Long Island Iced Tea (in a cheap plastic Budweiser Cup) was delivered to Manar by a waitress who said "compliments of the gentleman in the corner."

We both laughed. None of us drinks, so the gesture was doubly useless. Sorry buddy yu just thre 8 bucks down the drain. Honestly, sometimes i'm embarrassed by my fellow male cohorts.

Apparently, the Long Island Iced tea has the mother load of alcoholic mixture, potent enough to get the strongest of drinkers woozy. And with the quickness! Tells ya what that guy's motives are. It also tells ya how unsure he is of his prowess or better yet lack of it.

In any case the same guy who sent the drink blatantly and crassly asked "what are u?" Not even where are u from but "What are u?" Manar looked at him as if he was on drugs. "I'm a human being." she thought "But i wasn't even gonna bother with him.

Well, i got my mega excercise and fun dancing with Manar and with others. Manar was cool with it all but i could see Salsa was more her music so next time we are going to her Salsa Club.

In any case, we went back to Manar's apt and proceeded to view hundreds of digital images of her travels; France, Italy, Spain and her homeland of Kuwait.

Yes, Manar is Kuwaiti and not necessarily screaming this from the rafters. For one, she feels very American as I do. We tend to and have kept our Cuban-ness/Kuwaiti-ness in check. She believes that its because as soon as people hear that they jump to stereotypical conclusions.

While looking at the Kuwait pictures, Manar recounted the tale of the occupation (when Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait that led to the original Gulf War) which floored me. I had no idea that for nearly 8 months things were pretty rough in Kuwait and that Saddam was stripping that country of all of its wealth and oppressing the people. I mean all i remember is that he went in, took over, then we went in, kicked him out. The blur was what was happening on the ground. But apparently everything came to a halt.

What was great is that this was a first hand account not from CNN or the nightly news. She's not some person in a suit regurgitating the news. This happened to a person to a person closer to my age, so i could relate. It made me think of the fact that my parents went thru something similar but i might never witness that here in the US. Imagine non-US troops in the streets attacking our country. Impossible!

And yet that automatically puts us inside a bubble. We just cant relate. We have it pretty good.

I slept until 2pm on Sunday and rushed out to go buy groceries for the Cuban dish i was going to prepare for my Couch Surf Housemates in Sommerville (DeWolf, Kate and Colleen), Manar, Rago (Manar's Columbian friend) and Linda (a new cool -as-hell friend i just met at the Boston Museum of Art on Friday who is a nurse at a nearby hospital and about the most open minded full blooded American i've ever met). So off i went on the bus at the corner of Washington and Newton that was to take me to the red line station of Downtown Crossing so i can go uptown past Harvard to Davis Square.

Only one problem, i had never been on this bus before and i got so lost that i actually stayed on long enough to make the loop back to where i began. I got on another bus and this time kept my eyes peeled for Downtown Crossing. Once at Davis Square i got chicken from Miki nnie's, onions, red and green peppers from an Indian Market and the rice and peas from a local convenience store. I was going to make everybody my world famous (OK my mom's world famous) Arozz con Pollo. Which is yellow rice and chicken, a delicious dish i've cooked in nearly 30 of the 50 United States.

A great waft of onions, garlic and chicken greeted my guests. Always funny when i'm holding court in a house i dont even own or rent. DeWolf, Colleen and Kate (Couch Surf Hosts) have been the best, giving me a comfy Futon, hot showers, left over meals and a warm home to stay in for nearly 5 days.

Hugging Manar and Rago (who was the best conversationalist - zipping and commenting from topic to topic whether it be politics, food, school etc..) goodbye DeWolf, Linda and I sat till midnight yapping about Bush, the war, conspiracy theories and even the sexual capacities of quadra-plegics! You never know what will come up while mixing a diverse group of folks together.

DeWolf was a fountain of fairness when it came to discussing hot topics. In a city like Boston where u generally hear the liberal side (i.e anti Bush) it was refreshing to see somebody both lambast our leader but also give credit for the smarts that most folks think are absent.

By one a.m. it was time to call it a night since Linda had to drive to her home in Tuksberry (i.e. the suburbs) MA, a place i thought did not exist in Boston. I've been so used to city living and touring that i dont believe i've ever seen a cookie cutter community there yet. I'll have to check it out some time.

I walked her to her car, said goodbye and walked up the slippery sidewalk back and

reflected on a great week for in a few hours i was to catch the 6am train to the airport. It was a cold, crisp New England night. The white snow - or what was left of it - glistening down the road, on car rooftops and edges of shingles made for a postcard moment in time. At least for me it did. I still feel i'm in as much of a foreign country as i could be.

Tomorrow i'd venture back to warmer climes. Miami! Two baptisms, two meetings, several dinner dates and some dancing would be awaiting me before my return to attempt to get back on the Worldwalk by late January. Lets just hope the cold doesn't lull me into taking even more time off. I shouldn't worry about when i go back, this walk is not a race, but i must admit, my feet are itchin to be back out there.

Cesar Becerra
Sommerville, MA

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7 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - The T; Boston's Mass "Entertainment" Subway System I have forgotten why they call it that. The T. In Atlanta its Marta. In New York just The Subway. In Washington DC its The Metro. Miami its Metro Rail. But in Boston... the T.

Hmmm, by the end of this story i'll know my answer. In any case, i've been riding the T all week. A very well used and supported mass transit system that gets ya wherever u wanna go in Boston.

Its also pretty entertaining while ur are in route to get there. Just about every stop will have a performer. And sure that's no news to New Yorkers, where performers and pandhandlers (as well as whack-0's) ride in just about each and every car.

But i'd have to say that i've noticed the caliber of performers seems to be higher here in Boston. Can't figure it out. Although i think i have a good theory.

Here is some of what i've got:

In New York i find myself hurriedly passing the jazz musician or breakdancer, here in Boston i have on many an occassion been stopped straight in my tracks while a musician is entertaining a crowd.

Part of the reason is that they are pretty good and the other is that i have noticed that each performer needs to apply for an entertainer permit that MUST be clearly displayed near their basket, bucket or hat where they catch whatever generosity the public bestows on them.

So i guess that weeds out the riff-raff, the desperate and the fly-by-night wanabees... all or most of which can barely play a chord. Or just those that feel its not worth the time to go to city hall and go thru the paperwork.

Now i sense there is another reason. Call it a simple environmental phenomenon that makes Boston the "it" transit system for those who want to perform underground.

I'll call it the chill factor.

Lets face it, boston's just chill. Laid back, u know, folks here are after a slower, more enjoyable, stress-free life. New York; a zoo! Chasing that dollar. Folks are moving at three times the pace i have witnessed here.

And the whole system in Boston reflects that. New York, u can buy ur tickets at hi-tech booths that accept credit cards. Boston booths are tiny little cages where u slip in a dollar and a quarter and u get a token... FROM a HUMAN BEING.

And that transit worker, has stacks of quarters and dollars, awaiting a quick but not lightening speed transaction where a few flicks of a finger zings each quarter under the glass partition. The process so slow that lines form. This is "chill" personified, amplified and just plain amazing! A rarity in New York. But get this, no one is freaking out!

I think this and the fact that Boston trains take forever to arrive at a station allows the passenger to be in a better and more receptive mood. The platforms themselves are narrower, the entire station is less cavernous (than as in New York where u will sometimes have 5 rail lines running side by side) and so there is more of an intimate feel to the entire space.

I witnessed in one station a duo playing guitar who attracted the attention of a young mother who passed along a dollar to her 2 year old wearing this fuzzy pink jacket that made her look like a pink eskimo. The kid stood there, dollar in hand, not knowing what to do. The kid mesmerized. The audience smiling. The musicians playing. And the dollar after a minute (statistics show that dollars being waved in new york live a shorter life than the hands of their original owner!!!), was still in the air, clutched in the hand of this little girl.

Now the fact that the kid could even stand in one spot alone without being toppled by hundreds of hurried and harried passengers is a miracle in itself.

Simply put; Calm atmosphere, intimate settings, slower trains, motivated musicians.....all make for a great music scene.

One performer in particular caught my ear way before i actually saw her. I was entering the Davis Square T stop when i had the pleasure of hearing Jenn Taranto play her guitar and sing her soulful songs. The acoustics (when the train wasn't running thru the station) were amazing. So much so that i purposely allowed myself the opportunity to hear another song. This meant watching one train come and go and waiting for the next one.

I made the right choice. My story on Jenn's music will appear on my other blog www.planetcesar.blogspot.com in a few days. Look for it.

Now, as for "T" and what does it mean?

I've searched the T website, i've even asked "Jeeves" but to no avail, so i'm gonna make up my own story.

Underground "BOSTON" is just a big ole "T" party!

Until i find the real story, i'll stick with my lame one.

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6 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Dating in the new Millennium, parts one of two - Jesse meets Angie

Angie and Jesse didn't know it. But they had set the stage for the subject which i was about to tackle later tonight at Boston's Museum of Fine Art. Friends of my brother Carlos.... Better yet, the sole reason they found each other was because my brother had invited them both to his birthday party one year. So u could say he played cupid. Though cupid's arrow wasn't piercing through Angie's then unconvinced skin that Jessie, a marketing major at Florida International University (now the marketing director at the NBC affiliate WTVJ in Miami), was indeed THE ONE.

Maybe it was the lawyer in her. Angie, who studied and is now practicing law, just didn't feel the sparks. And she was putting up a good wall against any of his advances. As any good lawyer knows how to do. Jesse asked her out anyway, they had a time or two out on the dating circuit and still no interest. Jessie came clean and

put it straight to her in no uncertain words; "Look i know u dont like me, and that's ok, it shows. But i'm patient." Angie, livid that this unknown entity in her life had called the cards right remembered thinking... "how does he know that, am i really showing that?"

In any case a year went by, and they both went their own way. The following year when my brother Carlos had yet another birthday. He again invited his friends. Angie and Jessie were still his buddies. So they both came to celebrate. Only this time, Jesse was in a relationship. Angie had been pining for another guy who in a role reversal from Jesse, had not really shown much interest in her. In the middle of the party, with Jesse's girlfriend asleep, Jesse went over to Angie, struck up a conversation. And...you guessed it...nothing. Another year went by. They went their separate ways.

Next birthday party for Carlos. Same thing. Only this time, they had a shared history, a tradition if u will. Similar to the line in that great Tom and Jerry episode where the narrator says "and every time the cat would play...the mouse would dance." Well everytime Jesse would advance, Angie would feign any interest. Ah but alas, Jesse's persistence began to show promise. Angie relates; "by this time it was kind of a running joke, i think i started seeing him in a different way." Sorry folks, but birthday three...still no dice.

Fourth time though was a charm. Carlos' Birthday. Fourth year in a row! That's when it happened Angie continues; "I saw him again, he was involved with a girl, but he overheard me talking about my famed singles dinner party, and he proceeded to invite himself to it." Angie was aghast. She remembers thinking "this guys got some nerve." She approached him firmly; "Look this party is for single people only." Jesse quipped back; "Don't you worry, you send me the invite, i'll be single by then!" BAMM! Is this guy good or what. The rest as they say is history. Not long after, they were engaged and today they were in Boston celebrating their one year anniversary. I met them at a coffee house just minutes before i was to go to an interesting event at the Museum of Fine Art, where the bigger picture of their tale plays out at www.planetcesar.blogspot.com

In a nutshell, i was invited to witness a singles gathering. What i found in that event was more of a tale of two worlds. That of chance and that by design. In the realm of finding yur potential life mate, do you force it to happen or do you let it happen. And there is a fine line between both those camps.

Again, for those i met at the museum, and told u to read blog on this page, hyper link now to www.planetcesar.blogspot.com

Cesar Becerra
Sommerville, MA

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5 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Boston; Where Pretension meets Reality. Ahh the future. I can guarantee you this about the future. No one really can predict what will happen. But there is another thing i can tell ya; no one will ever stop trying to predict what it will look like, what will happen etc... Thus is the thoughts i had while visiting the Museum of Science in Boston where they have completed and opened to the public a state of the art, 5 million dollar exhibit called Star Wars; Where Science meets Imagination. It took nearly 3 and a half years to build!

Basically, it goes a step beyond the film and discusses how the fictional technology can work, does work or will work in the real world. Even though Star Wars was set in a "galaxy, far far away", its inspiration stemmed on many occasions from real life technology dating back several dozen years ago. The x-wing fighters (space bound f-16's basically) were based on old footage George Lucas had from World War II "dog

fighting" (where German pilots chased and were chased mid flight from American fighter pilots) movies. The Luk Skywalker land speeder, really was intended to be a station wagon like beat up transportation workhorse. Etc..etc..

Everything old is new again. Lucas' genius was that he knew folks had forgotten the past. And in a sense, Star Wars was American Graffiti but disguised in another space-like world. Harrison Ford's hot-rod in one movie was now the Millennium Falcon (a souped up old clunker with added parts), Skywalkers right of passage was the struggle in American Graffiti with the just-graduated-teens thinking about "what are we gonna do with the rest of our lives?"

I have always been a fan of all the movies. A bit more the originals than the latter more computer generated ones. Which in reality, i think u come away with a great respect for how the filmmakers - Mr. Lucas in particular - created technologies needed solely for capturing what was in someone's mind. Which is part of the problem in amassing an exhibit like "Where Science Meets Imagination". I think the "how to" is soooo overpowering that the science takes a backseat although it is always in ur face with side exhibitry about magnets, lasers etc... On more than one occassions witnessed a small army of people hovering round the plasma screens staring and laughing at behind the scenes footage of R2-D2 or 3C-P0, taking snapshots of the abominable snowman looking monster from the planet "hoth" and sizing up Chewbacka, than discussing the merits of hover-technology.

And let me be clear, its not that The Museum of Science didn't do their job right. In fact i and u'd be most impressed at the lengths with which they went to explain the science of it all. But it is we the people, who come out to take in the novelty of it all. Who gawk, as i did at the costumes, models, maquettes and scaled down pod-racers, who have become jaded enough to just know that if its flyin in a movie, then darn-it IT MUST FLY! If George made it and designed it to fly, then the laws of science are on his side. After all is he not a modern day God. Well, at least i know of several annual conventions-goers that will readily agree.

But whad-a-ya-gonna-do? Its got to be entertaining right. That fine line now called "edutainment". I'm being critical yes, but i'll blame the gift shop that u have to exit thru. Yu guessed it; filled with Star Wars memorabilia, t-shirts, and \$129 light-sabers. Any thoughts on science went out the window there. Maybe a lesson on the science of economics or marketing is apropos.

Later that evening i met up with Tara, a virgin-couch surf hoster (i say that because she not only is new to the site but has not met with or hosted or surfed a couch in her life) who i reached out to a few weeks ago. Though her profile was as empty as ole mother hubbards cubbard (we are talkin, not a stitch of profile info, just her name - even the photo was a silhouette of a girl with a question mark) i decided to reach out to her anyway, in the hopes of atleast uncovering just who this mystery woman was. At least i wanted to congratulate her for having the courage to become a member. Its not most folks that decide each and every day to open their homes, lives etc.. for travellinstrangers. Ok we're not strangers, everybody on www.couchsurfing.com has a bit of background, recommendations and testimonials from others, but ya gotta admit the entire idea still raises eyebrows to the non-converted.

She invited me to a Villanova graduates reunion/Hurricane Katrina fundraiser who's hook was booze and watching Villanova beat the pants off of whoever the hell they were playing. Yu can tell just how much of a sports nut i am. So we got together at "Cheers", u know, where "everybody knows ur name!" Well she might have known my name but how the hell was she to yell it out over the crowd of over 100, that had amassed in tiny Cheers. I remember her original e-mail stating "well i have no piercings on my face and my hair is not purple... so that means i'm gonna look like just about every other white girl in Boston coming that evening!"

Though i'll have to agree with her on that, after i got to know her (and she ended up finding me, thanks to my french styled woll hat and pony tail) i couldn't have possibly confused her with any other woman there that night. For one thing, Tara is

what i would call a "closet nomad", just itching to fly...take off....leave the world of the matrix behind her. She understands that she must pay the piper for her lot in life but a part of her is on auto-cruise-control. Half engaged. A foot inside the door wearing a heal, the other with comfy shoes about to don a backpack and tour the world. I heard tales of conforming, differences of opinion with colleagues, and disdain for the upscale crowd - who in the past she has been able to cleverly blend in, even going as far as to just go with the flow and convince tweed-type Bifs and Muffys that she really did graduate from Yale, Harvard or even Villanova.

Boston is a very intellectual city. It is the epicenter of learning. Of understanding. Etc...But it can fall prey to using smarts as an oppressive and prejudicial sword. Just as Tara finds that she has to be careful on what radical views she shares. I found her to be mouse-like at times, leaning in, whispering great tales of rebellious thoughts, all-the-while sheepishly looking around to see if anybody heard her. But there is no doubt, she is on her way. In a sense, joining couch surfing is akin to joining the communist party of old. Its an act of rebellion. A signal to all that u not only understand another way of life, but u even support it.

Tara is but one of a few "real" people i have met this week. Speaking of...A few days ago, on a bus ride towards the Prescott Hotel, i had asked a lady sitting next to me where the T (the term used for the Subway System in Boston) stop was on the route. I did not want to miss it. She let me know. I thanked her. She mentioned she was going the same way to start a new job. Curious, i both congratulated her and inquired what job did she land. "Short order cook at South Kitchen, its saving my life!" Hmmm, what proceeded was a tale of sorrow, reality and hope.

Denise is homeless for the first time in her life. She has been staying at a downtown shelter. A man had ruined her. Took all her money. "Did me wrong." She was down to nothing. Not even the fare to get back so she was going to have to walk back in the dark at night in the cold. I handed her a dollar. She thanked me and then tears began to well up in her eyes. They were genuine, and i felt she was even embarassed to show them. This was a proud lady, you could see (appearance wize, clothes, hair etc) and sense, this was a whole new world to her. I patted her on the shoulder and told her "its gonna be alright" and i hope it will.

Cesar Becerra
Davis Square, MA

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4 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Sharing a heritage with strangers; Boston dances Salsa - now i know!

I slept in again today at the Prescott. Took a nice hot shower and headed downstairs to the basement to watch a documentary called Dark Days. Its a film about the underground homeless that once lived in the New York City Train Tunnel System. In the relative comfort of the plush couches at the Prescott with the large screen TV, i watched as these amazingly resourceful band of men and women cooked, showered, watched TV, discussed politics, philosophize and eek out a living in what clearly was the nastiest underground lair u could imagine. Rats, trash and dillapitated shanties made up their world and they were happy. The film won several awards from Sundance and reaffirmed the notion that the ultra real its ultra interesting. In a sense its an easy formula. Think about it. We live in such a hyper-plastic world that simply "turning the light on" in a tunnel can reveal a slice of life we all thought was non-existent. I'd like to do the same with the nomads i meet each day. I pine for my digital video camera but i still feel i'm in need of soaking it all in without the interference that comes from needing to capture a moment. For now the moments are being lived, taken in, breathed in deeply. I'm capturing it solely for myself.

Boston is cold! Cold i tell ya. I bundle up every day when i head outside. Its a process that leaves me feeling bloated. Like the michelin man. My clothing and gear

are as varied as my travel. Gloves and fuzzy head and ear band borrowed from my friend Marji from Atlanta. A Baker Street London Wool coat from an estate sale i handled in Hurleyville, NY. Thick cargo pants from a thrift shop in Montana. And i still keep my eye out for new stuff. well old-new stuff. I cant walk by a thrift store without stopping. There are gems in there i tell ya.

The day ended with a long subway ride past Harvard to Davis Square and the home of "Colleen", yet another couch surf host who has travelled extensively throughout the world including a hike and mountain bike expedition across South Korea. Each time i hear of their journeys, i feel like booking a ticket immediately. But its not the way i want to go. I want to walk across these places and i'd rather be patient now than rushing any potential adventure. Besides i'm learning too much about myself and my surroundings right here in the states.

For example tonight i went to a Salsa Club at the restaurant and bar "Antua-Nua" (i think i butchered that spelling) where i came crashing into a reality that i have been escaping. Namely, just how far removed i am from my heritage. I'm exaggerating of course but on this night i witnessed a phenomenon i had never seen in my native Miami. That of master and eloquent dancing of Salsa by non-Latinos. Now of course it sounds a little prejudice to say that i'm shocked to see anybody else than that of Latinos dance Salsa so well. But its still a shocker. Particularly all the white, pasty as they can get, women, completely slithering, spinning, convulsing in a passionate "salsera" expose.

I was stunned. So much so that i felt incredibly self conscious about even getting out on the dance floor. This is very odd for me because i'm usually the first one out. Then again that is if the dancers are not as good as me. I have to admit i'm a bit cocky when i go out to a club. A hip-hop club that is. I'm not much for rock or latin, techno or trance. But a hip-hop club or just a place playing any type of hip hop music. I'm there. In Boston, like this Friday and Sat. its Club Hong Kong. In Chattanooga its The Drink. In Los Angeles its Sugar. In Key West; Ricks. Miami; Club Space and Vision. Daytona Beach; Fuel!

When i'm there and the music is just pumpin, I tend to take over a "scene" if u will. Creatively bringing to life the feeling of a song in a way that make all smile, be entertained and get me some attention. I sorta kill myself. I get more excecize in one 3 or 4 hour block of time than any 20 mile day on the worldwalk. Yes Hip Hop is my music. I love to dance to anything with a slow, melodic and thumping and ryming beat. The irony is that when i dance to hip hop at clubs, i give a little pop or dash of my cuban-ness with a twirl, hip-shake or gesticulating hand gestures. But not the other way around. I couldn't hold up against even some of the beginners i saw that night to save my life. Embarrassing right. I mean i'm Cuban, they are not!

Well i learned my lesson. And got one in return. Kelly, one of the promoters and dance instructors i was admiring took me out on the dance floor and showed me how to do a turn in the middle of a step. Before then i could only do two types of moves in my native dance, but never with any extras; a spin, a twirl, etc...It was not easy. Kelly, was amazing. After my quick leson i asked to go and retreat into my corner and just watch her. She danced with an African American man who for sure was not latin- i spoke to him later to make sure - but both could have fooled any dance contest judge. Folks, its hard to describe, but there in front of my very eyes, a heritage and a legacy was being passed down from one generation to the next. But not from one latino to the next but from latino to the anglo world. It was mesmerizing. It was art. And they were not just OK, they were on fire.

I didnt get where the guy was from, but Kelly is from Pennsylvania. She lived and got hooked on Salsa in Chicago and when she got to Boston there was almost nobody dancing. She was used to dancing 4 nights a week. She had to resort to dancing in a friend's apartment. That's how bad she missed it. She later hooked up with a Columbian fellow named Johnny and now teaches lessons. "Come dance with Johnny and Kelly" their flyer said. Over the loud music i asked Kelly what it means to her. What is the deeper meaning behind the music, the dancing. "It is hard to put into words because its an emotion an expression that u are feeling that can only come out

on the dance floor, between two people and together with the entire room flowing."

Wow. Those two made us (the Latino world that gave birth to it all) proud! And they also no longer allowed it to be ours solely. And good for them. A piece of who I am, a piece that I thought only belonged to me, is now everybody's.

I have a long way to go to brush up on my Salsa dancing. I now realize, I had only begun to master it. Sure at Anglo parties I could dazzle them with a hint of what I saw that night. But it was only basic. I am only half of what I was born into. Then again, I was born here. I have always known I'm not very Cuban or even very Cuban American. Tonight, mainly on the sidelines, I got to know and measure just how much. When I return to Boston in the future, I'm definitely signing up for one of Kelly's classes. But if you are in Boston, please don't hesitate, just e-mail her at Kelly@sal.saboston.com

A dash across the highway bridge, with a great view of the neon Citgo sign, found me just in time to catch the last 12:30 train back to Colleens for the night. Back in the quiet and quaint row house area of Davis Square, in a neighborhood as American as apple pie, I retreated to a more comfortable reality. The tropics were never mine to begin with. I was born in two worlds, and chose one in particular to follow. The other one I will have to chase down. Maybe I'll catch up to it one day, maybe not.

3 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Square Peg, Round Hole; The state of MA tries to categorize me

My main reason for visiting Boston this trip was to put an end to a nightmare that began many moons ago.

So the day started with a trip to Boston Medical Hospital to settle a long standing bill that has been in limbo, as the administration, the state of Massachusetts and a bevy of health care professionals tried over the last 5 months to see which peg I fit into. On August 18th of last year I suffered a passing of a kidney stone, had to be rushed to the hospital where no less than 12 hours, 3 nurses and 6 doctors later, I was pain free and stuck with a \$7,150 hospital bill!

The irony was that I had become sorta too healthy in relation to my diabetes. Because I was exercising regularly, and by this time, hiking in the heat of the summer, I got into trouble by not drinking enough water. One of the red flags of diabetes is excessive thirst. In the past I would devour any liquids. Unfortunately I had a sweet tooth for Coca Cola! But after my diagnosis with Type 2 diabetes on Jan. 2, 2000, I learned to control my sugars and consequently I was never that thirsty again. Unfortunately I also (in my new healthy outlook on life) later saw drinking any liquids as a sign that I was "falling off the wagon" that I was not taking care of myself. So I actually stayed away from drinking too much. Add to this my ultra light weight hiking style, and there I had a recipe for disaster. There simply was no room, nor did I want to be bothered by carrying water around. Hell it weighs a ton. Boy was I asking for it.

Kidney stones form when your kidney isn't flushed out regularly. Particularly when you are eating high sodium based foods. And the ultimate sweetener now for non sugared drinks is lots of sodium. I also like carrying canned sardines that are loaded with sodium. Peanuts and cashews! Forget it. Salt city. And so it happened. A stone formed. and it hurt like hell. Later I asked my boss at EFT tours (Mary Perez - mother of two kids) to describe her kidney stone pains. Her answer; "Its worse than the pain of giving birth. You don't feel like your dying - YOU WANT TO DIE!" Well I said Mary, I agree.

The pain was unbearable. But nothing compared to the long 5 month wait to see how this bill would finally be settled. See I'm like a square peg and the world would love to fit me into a round hole, but as you know, the success rate for that is not high. I am un-insured, not by choice but by prejudice and a double standard that

exists called "pre-existing condition".

Years ago when i had health insurance, way before my diagnoses with Diabetes, all was well, i paid 90 bucks a month for really nothing. I was never sick. I never took medicine. But when my diabetes came into my health realm and my original health care provider went under, i was transferred to another provider.

The state of Florida protected me so that another insurance company had to take me in regardless of my aforementioned "pre-existing condition" and i was fine. I paid a bit more (\$130 bucks a month - for really nothing because by this time i was treating my diabetes with exercise and diet) but that was doable. But one day the company decided to no longer insure self employed individuals.

I was left out in the cold and during that last switch, the state laws had changed. Another provider had to take me on but now they could charge what they wanted and my pre-existing condition became a gold mine for them. They wanted me to pay nearly 750 bucks a month (about the cost of a mortgage - for health services i dont even use) and another company wanted 900!

I was out. and i decided to stay out and take whatever came and deal with it.

So when the trip to the Emergency room came with the kidney stone, it was time to see where the rabbit hole of the health care world went. My bill looked like an Egyptian panel of hieroglyphics. Codes and numbers and strange abbreviated words. A simple Cat scan alone cost nearly 4,000 dollars! But that cost was divided into 3 parts. Apparently, though i was zapped one time, it took "3 views".

There were costs for this, costs for that. The irony is that with strong drugs, costing only 90 bucks and several glasses of water, this stone would have come out. I was angry at the excess, angry at myself and angry that in the end all i had to do was wait. But when you are in pain and dont know - you panic. I am glad i know what the pain is if it ever comes back, but i assure you, i dont intend it to come back.

Initially, the state of Massachusetts tried to get me into a program in which the entire bill would be covered (Mass Health Free Care). that process took 2 months of documents being faxed back and forth, calls and interviews, financial records checked. I was as unique a case as they could find. I was technically homeless, because i have no home. but i wasn't homeless enough (with letter from a shelter) to take on the loop hole that allowed the state to pay the bill.

I had no assets, but i made a pile of money the year before as a consultant for a major environmental lawsuit. But my current income was peanuts. I was stuck in a vortex. Throughout it came an angel of sorts. An administrator named "angel eddy" (i am masking his full name) who oversees a pressure cooker of an office that sees a wild assortment of the poor, disenfranchised and downright not-right-in-the-head-folks, who he has to accommodate and help fit in an appropriate pocket so that their bills can be paid either with assistance from the state or a clever payment plan. I befriended eddy and confessed that paying the bill outright (though i could muster) would have seriously left me tight on funds to continue my trek.

Eddy kept me abreast of the process. Through ups and downs, i had travelled back and forth to Boston to see it thru. I did not want to be another number. And i wanted to take care of the responsibility of my bill. In the end, which came today, the hospital, Eddy in particular, decided to slash my bill in half and put me down for a generous payment plan. I was elated. Early on in the process, he commented; "It was very unusual for you to come in so early after your hospitalization to inquire about your bill. Some people dont even call back, much less pay."

Well today i began paying. And i will happily pay. I am still uninsured, but there are programs and people out there who if you can be patient and find them through the bureaucracy, will listen. Will help. Will come up with a solution.

In the end i will end up paying far less than if i had been paying a hundred or so bucks each month for these last 6 years. So i'm at peace with it. And i will drink

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more water and i have cut off the excess sodium. My health is in my hands. Some people cant understand a life without health insurance. But it is possible.

You either pay now or you pay later! Its that simple. I know, despite my bout with "the stone", that i am far healthier now than i have ever been, and far healthier and careful that most Americans are about their health. I will keep that up, as my main health care plan.

On my way back to the hostel, i walked by the ice sculptures in Copley Square. Each year for new years eve, several artists stack, saw and shave chunks of mini iceburgs into flowing figures and objects. I saw them the other day on the news standing proudly in the sun. They looked massive, impenetrable and BIG.....much like my hospital bill.

But time marches on, the weather changes, and even these monoliths melt. Today they were chunks on the ground.

OK, mission accomplished in Boston. Now to have some fun. Tomorrow i leave the Prescott Hotel/Hostel and head for another couch surf adventure with a new friend "Colleen" and some Salsa dancing with Manar and company at a local dance hall.

Cesar Becerra
Everett, MA, Basement of Prescott Hotel

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2 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - Pancakes, String Beans, Indian Tea and Tofu; A Balanced Global Meal

Dave and Manar woke up way before me. I do admit i love to sleep in. But what woke me was not the sun or the long sleep but the great smell of garlic and oil cookin in Manar's kitchen. Dave had just got back from nearby "Foodies" (a high end gourmet grocery store), with garlic and greenbeans, bisquick and tofu, even a special tea from india that tasted surprisingly like Cuban Coffee mixed with milk (Cafe con Leche)....when i finally got up and witnessed a mess of activity in the kitchen. I felt guilty so i cruched and sliced the garlic, flipped tofu and signed up early for dish washing patrol. I'm an avid dishwashing nut. Its a gift i've noticed all my hosts seem to enjoy. I always insist.

After all was set on the table we feasted and got on the subject of Cubaw where i recounted the story of the USS maine being blown up in Havana harbor that truly began Americas empire building and foreign meddling.

Castro was compared quite accurately to Hussein, The War on Terror to the Cold War, and slowly the hours evaporated as quickly as all the food did.

A quick walk up the road found me at a bus stop where i headed to the nearest T-station (the subway system of Boston) to head to Everett, MA just outside Boston's city limits where the historic Prescott Hotel stands at 36 Church Street. Historic for several reasons, the biggest of which was that John Lennon once stayed in room 12.

Wayne at the desk welcomed me with open arms. A section of the hotel is indeed a hostel, and a great one at that. Once they heard about my worldwalk they threw in a free night "on the house." Too nice. They even put my brochure up and labeled it "guest of the week!"

I checked into a top bunk inside room 16 where i share the room with a native of Zimbabwe and a Korean fellow and thought i was going to just konk out. The Koren guy was quiet but the Zimbabwean was in a huff of political bantering that included a tirade about genocide in Africa and getting the US government involved in fixing it all.

I unpacked my stuff into an old chest as he ranted on about the 200 e-mails he's been sending out each day. He apparently is staying at the hostel for a month. A surprising number of people actually LIVE at hostels. I have witnessed that in Orlando, Los Angeles and now Boston. At 22 bucks a night or a special of 600 a month. You just cant beat that.

So, since there was free internet access down in the basement, i was inspired to begin my daily blogs on globenotes. Probably due to the fact that i'm being exposed to soooo much each day and i want to get it down.

But i must admit i'm slowin down now and will retire early. Though its now 1:30am! The last two late nights have my clock all messed up. I will try to keep this blog as a more brief account of my daily journey logistically and physically and a description of the people i meet more than an essay type form such as my blog at www.planetcesar.blogspot.com

The key word is TRY. So if i dont succeed, do forgive me. Tomorrow is hospital day. A story in and of itself! So i'll try and get some rest now. Stay tuned...

Cesar Becerra
Everett, MA

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1 Jan 2006

miami florida, United States - The Modern Nomad; Three more join the ranks and get counted.

I should have a clicker! Those little people clickers u see at stadiums or clubs that count the crowd piling in. Only mine would have to be electronic cuz our tribe is growing in numbers at such an astounding rate, i bump into them each and every day.

By tribe i mean, folks like me. Restless spirits. Travel junkies. Total global wanderers. We are everywhere. After sleeping in till noon at May-May's home, Kris took me on a snow hike in the three states area (where MA, CT and some other state - forgive my terrible New England geography deficiency) on a trail that made me think of my winter crossing on the Appalachian Train in the winter of 2002.

Kris, who i previously quoted as being a self described "nerd" is a great example of a portrait of the new nomad. A computer sciences student at Florida International University, Kris is a good example of the hyper-connected modern day nomad. yes there are levels and extremes. I'm a good extreme of the opposite spectrum. I carry no cell phone, no lap top, no camera etc...Kris on the other hand...and by the way there is nothing wrong with this its just a personal preference...carries her wireless lap top, cell phone and digital camera when she travels.

Kris is about to embark on a two month journey to New Zealand and Australia (and i think parts of Europe). She was certain to get a special pack that has the capability to zip off a day pack that will allow her to travel lightly, Apple i-book laptop in hand.

It is truly an exciting era we live in where "hot spots" at cafes, museums, airports and many other places allow a traveller to stay connected at any moment. We have cell phones that can attach to cameras. Hell we have cell phones that ARE cameras as well!

A century ago, one had to wait for word of a long journey. Sometimes months to get a visual sketch, a grainy glass plate negative photo or a even knowledge that the expedition was alive. A half century ago, we waited maybe a week or two for the next month's National Geographic volume to grace us with views of the farthest reaches of the world. Today there is daily e-mails, live satellite feeds, hell even 24 hour mini cameras at south pole stations. You can even watch - if u have the time - an intimate birth of a giant panda as many have done so with the worlds nerwest baby

panda born at The National Zoo in Washington DC.

After our trek in the snow ended i was dropped off at the bus station for a quick jaunt over to Boston where i was to be picked up by a fellow Couch Surfer named Manar - who i found out - much to my surprize - is Kuwaiti! On top of that, Manar was taking me to meet Dave, an American born (Vietnamese descendant) bicycling adventurist who spent 11 months peddling thru South America!

As i climbed into her car at the South Street Bus Station, still stunned by the news of her being from Kuwait, it had dawned on me that growing up in Miami, as international as Miami is, still doesnt cast a wide net in terms of global representation.

This is not a criticism but more of a geographic fact or even a demographic one. Most of the 40 plus nationalities that i remember being represented at my high school (no doubt there was even a wider base throughout the rest of South Florida) were primarily from Latin American or Caribbean countries. But within that, the majority were very much from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas etc....

Course compared to like Wichita Kansas, i was exposed to a smorgasborg of cultures, but now that i see the wider global representation seen in Boston, New York, and LA, i now see that the Cuban population really permeated all aspects of life in South Florida and it was hard to see or be exposed to anything else. Plus in the media, the prominent folks were the mayor (Cuban), business leaders (Cuban), and in cases of corruption in those pockets...course were more Cubans.

I'm off on a tangent but it was interesting to meet in the course of an evening someone from Kuwait and someone whos heritage is Vietnamese. We yapped till 3am and weaved in and out of a bevy of topics that ranged from light weight packing, politics, romance on the road and the origins of our wanderlust.

I was originally heading to a hostel that night because Manar was expecting her new roommate to move in on the same day and did not want to risk spooking her with such a radical idea such as Couch Surfing or having nomads on the floor! But a last second change-up on her roommates part had her moving in the next day, so Manar had both Dave and I surf for the night. Funny i used to think that hostels were the epicenter of exposure to international personalities, but now i see that couch surf homes are just as diverse.

My curiosity cup was full that night. Course i kept a list of questions for the next day. My head hit the inflatable mattress hard while Dave crashed on the couch. What do u get when u mix Kuwaiti, Cuban and Vietnamese -American nomads in one apartment in the south end of Boston? A better understanding between cultures.

Cesar Becerra
Boston, MA

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31 Dec 2005

miami florida, United States - Cheesecake, Karioke and teenaged Grandmas. A split decision made me turn away from the mob at Times Square and begin thinkin of other plans for Dec. 31st. Just 3 days before, as i walked across the street there, it dawned on me that this was going to be an excercise in futility. I made the right decision and went off to Worscester, Massachusettes via Greyhound to be picked up and whisked off to a warm home, with virtual complete strangers who not only had never met me but some had never heard of me. Course i could have done that in Times Square, but to do so would have meant standinf for nearly 6 hours in freezing temperatures just to see a ball drop. granted its no ordinary ball, but i felt a spontaneous journey was far more appealing.

My host Kris, a self described "nerd" from Miami (her words not mine) had invited me to visit her family and party with her family who are all of eastern european and

polish decadence.

Kris is a remarkable young woman i met online and is a fellow Couch Surfer (a new concept found at www.couchsurfing.com that brings travellers together with kind "hosts" who open their homes, couches and lives to our nomadic restless tribe).

Kris grew up in Connecticut next to Webster Lake (the actual name is virtually unpronounceable but if it sounds like spitting out two entire alphabets of letters thru an audio machine gun) in an idyllic new england setting, one where she was reminiscing about as she drove me from the bus station to family friend's (michelle) home near Thompson, Connecticut.

Upon arrival, a bevy of jovial, warm and increasingly tipsy aunts, uncles, cousins, and granma's hugged and welcomed me as we quickly settled in to snacking on a massive amount of terribly delicious food as well as play an endless stream of billiards.

Rack-em, stack-em, pause for a honey glazed sausage...pick a cue stick, chalk the tip and reach over for another chilled shrimp or drumstick dipped in sinful sauce...Break, sink a striped ball, and pop a stuffed mushroom or meatball in yur mouth, all-the-while wonderin "how the hell" will i have enough willpower to turn down dessert (i did not!)

It seemed to me that the family was made up of avid billiard club members. These were serious players. Fancy shots and combinations had me barely keeping up - and missing many shots due to intimidation of the veteran "pool sharks".

But the real fun began around 11pm when the karioke boom box was flipped on and middle aged and old alike (the teens refused to partake in such debauchery) grabbed the microphone and began belting "Proud Mary" or "Jack and Diane" even a bit of Billy Joel's "Big Shot" and a slice of Elton's "Philadelphia Freedom"...'shine a light, shine a light, why dont cha shine a light on meeeeeee, phi-LA-del-phi a freeddom!'

We were a sight. By midnight as the fluffy snow kept falling. I joined in full force and went down 1980's musical memory lane, making as much a fool of myself as they were. But we had a ball. Good ole fashin fun. I even partook in a polish tradition of downing (ok, ok, maybe sipping) a small sweet sugary shot called something like "yeshi via".

Jovial, rolly, happy new england folk was who i rolled with that night. Two particular older women stood out who made me realize we are trully as old as we feel. They couldn't be more different. Both were long time friends. "TC" and "May-May". TC sat most of the night reveling in the happy scene reminiscing about the downsides of the previous year but despite the downsides in her health, she "was alive", in the moment and jovial as hell to "get the new year under way".

"May-May" on the other hand (Eunice Bastik, Kris' grandma) danced the night away, swore and played pool and exuded such youth that if u had put an oversize energizer bunny suit, you'd swear it was being worn by a teen-aged ADD child that had just downed a quart of sugar!

May-may was one hot "mama", burning up the dance floor, singin popular tunes and cutin down with the best of the "boys." Her rendition of Frank Sinatra's "My Way" was more than entertaining. Though by then i'm sure she was properly "sauced up" (with booze), there was a sincerity and a conviction that this older generation is proud of. I felt that. Words sung, morphed into deep feelings of the past. Microphone gripped hard. Faced contorted as Frank and May-May ended the ditty..."I did it myyyyy wayyyyy!"

I made friends that night. Not a surprize of course, but making it even more unique was the fact that i had just met everybody just a few hours earlier. i guess i, for years have partied with my family or friends. One year blending into the next. I

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think i'll be starting a new year's resolution or tradition to enter a whole new realm and foreign environment when the clock strikes 12.

Kris' mom had made a scrumptious, special (low sugar) cheesecake that i simply could not resist. As my fork sliced thru that slice of heaven, the consistency and thick gooey texture stuck hard to the fork and later to the roof of my mouth. The taste lingered long after i was finished. Much like the moment, the fluffy snow outside and the new friends i was blessed to be with.

Cesar Becerra
Thompson, MA