

On the Big Road

Reading:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse, and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same,
A Southerner as soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable down by the
 Oconee I live,
A Yankee bound by my own way ready for trade, my joints the limberest joints on the
 earth and the sternest joints on the earth,
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deerskin leggings, a Louisianan or
 Georgian,
A boatman over bays or along coasts, a Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye.

Walt Whitman

Sermon:

I used to serve on the our denomination's professional credentialing committee, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and one March a few years ago I flew to Chicago for one of our meetings. That morning I had coffee with a colleague. With a slight Irish lilt and a beautiful command of the language, she discussed her ministry of spiritual direction, exuding a spiritual presence that created in me an actual physical tingle. After visiting with her I had to check myself in the mirror to make sure I did not have a glowing aura around me. This tingle persisted through my therapy appointments that day, through the ride to Logan, and entry onto the plane. But when a beefy, grinning man in a work shirt with the name "Al" stitched above the chest pocket took up the aisle seat, that spiritual glow disappeared.

I fished out my book and avoided eye contact. I told myself I am an introvert and don't need to make conversation. Al settled in and joked with the flight attendant. I continued reading. From time to time I noted that someone nearby had not showered in a while, and, from the corner of my eye, watched Al sipping a beer and listening to headphones.

That evening thunderstorms beset Chicago, closing O'Hare. My plane had to land in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to wait out the weather. Al turned to me, "You can hear air traffic control on the headphones. Looks like we'll be grounded for an hour or more."

At this point the Captain announced over the intercom, "Sorry, folks, but with O'Hare closed, it looks like we'll be grounded for at least an hour." Al nodded with a knowing grin. My book was boring, so I plugged in the headphones.

"Channel 11," Al suggested. He was right: quiet pauses, interrupted by air traffic control speaking to pilots.

“Reminds me of talking on my radio to other truck drivers,” Al leaned over to say. “We talk on CB channel 19.” I notice something in Al’s face. He has lit up, like he is really enjoying life in a plane on the tarmac in Grand Rapids. I don’t get it. He continues: “On the road you might be able to hear and be heard for a mile or two in each direction. Late at night you’ll get a little more range. Most of the talk concerns business: eastbounders asking westbounders where the cops are, how the weather is, and how traffic is rolling through town. If you want to shoot the breeze about life, you take it to another channel, although late at night no one minds that kind of talk. If you’re rolling the same way a conversation can last a hundred miles. But if you’re rolling westbound you might catch a bunch of eastbounders for only a few minutes, like blowing through a squall line.”

“If you saw ‘Smokey and the Bandit’” he continues, “you might think truckers talk in numbers, and call each other ‘good buddy.’ Naw. Actually, ‘good buddy,’ is more of an insult, like if a driver hogs half your lane while passing you on a curve, you tell him, ‘Just keep on truckin’ there, good buddy.’ That’ll burn him up.” He grins at me, and I think, my first lesson on how to talk like a truck driver, but then, why not?

“We don’t have numbers,” Al continues, “but you gotta know what to call things. You can call a truck driver a ‘driver’ or a ‘hand,’ or by the kind of truck they drive, like: ‘Hey Peterbilt,’ which is what I drive, or by the company ‘Hey Northbound Averitt’. Like the controllers talk to these pilots: ‘United 454’ is us. Or: ‘Hey parking lot’ for a car carrier, or ‘Mr. Chicken Hauler,’ for, yep, a chicken hauler.”

“A car is a ‘four-wheeler,’ usually preceded with the word ‘damn’ or other such comments. An eighteen-wheeler is a ‘big truck.’ A cop is a ‘bear,’ a ‘smokey,’ a ‘smokey-bear’ or a ‘full-grown bear.’ An unmarked cop car is a ‘plain wrapper.’ In a helicopter, it’s a ‘bear in the air.’ If he’s got his lights going, he’s ‘running the discos.’ If he’s got a car pulled over, it’s a ‘captured four-wheeler.’” Al laughed, and I smiled, like he’s kind of entertaining.

“A tire tread in the road is a ‘gator.’ In Florida, with a real alligator in the road, I don’t know what they’d say.” He shakes his head in sudden bafflement. “The right lane,” he continues, “is the ‘granny,’ and the left is the ‘hammer lane.’ The interstate is the ‘big road,’ a two-lane is a ‘skinny.’ An accident is a ‘wreck.’ If you are going to describe a wreck, you don’t get too creative with verbs and action: ‘A big truck and a four wheeler got together,’ that’s enough.” A cloud passed over his face. He paused and scanned the airplane.

Then he brightened and looked at me. “We use nicknames for the cities and states. The Wolverine, for Michigan, Blue Grass for Kentucky, Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye. If you’re northbound in Kentucky and you’re telling a southbounder you haven’t seen anything since an accident you passed around Nashville, you say, ‘Looks good back to the Volunteer. There’s a wreck before you hit the Guitar, but it might be rolling all right now.’”

“One number, of course is, 10-4, which means, I heard what you said. So someone might say, ‘Northbound Kenworthy, how’s it getting through that construction?’ And the other would answer, ‘It’s a mess, driver. I’d go the bypass around it.’ And the first, ‘10-4 on the bypass, ‘preciate it. Only two seasons here, winter and construction.’ And the other, ‘10-4 on that.’ And so it goes.”

“We don’t throw in too many cute sayings. Not many guys say, ‘Keep on truckin’.’ ‘Have a good ride on your way,’ is better. Once you’ve driven twenty years you’ll have earned the right to say something hokey like: ‘Keep her between the ditches,’ but by then you’ll know enough not to say it.”

I told him my version. “I go backpacking,” I said, “and other hikers and I will sometimes tell each other about conditions on the trail or how much further to the top of the pass. If I have had the trail all to myself for days, I’ll stop and talk with anybody. And of course, we share reports about bears. Hikers love bears, except when they steal our food. I guess if a bear and someone’s food were to get together, it would be a captured food bag.”

He nodded as if to say, 10-4, and gazed through the cabin of the plane. “I guess hiking gives you time to think,” he continued, “and so does truck driving. And there are moments. You fuel up in North Carolina and ride all day to Indiana and you climb out of the truck into air that’s 20 degrees cooler than in the Tar Heel, and somewhere on the way red clay has turned to brown dirt, and your breath fogs up, and in short sleeves it feels like real weather, and you’re not at home, but in a funny way you are home.”

He had this knowing air, and still I could not figure out his good cheer, nor what he was doing on an airplane. He talked some more about life on the road and asked where I was heading. I said, “A meeting in Chicago.”

At this point the captain announced we were cleared for take-off, and we replaced our headphones. We listened to the chatter between the tower and our pilot and the other pilots being released to finish flying to Chicago. On the runway, as we accelerated for takeoff, Al leaned over saying, “This is what I call the hammer lane. Mash your motor, driver.” And up we went.

Al said, “I’m heading home to Appleton, Wisconsin, you know, the Badger State. I had to fly because I was in a wreck. Yesterday, March 29, I was northbound on 495 with a load of car parts out of Birmingham, Alabama, for Portland, Maine. The load wasn’t due for another day, so I had plenty of time. I was thinking of running straight up to Portland, emptying, and maybe grabbing another load, or at least getting layover pay and seeing the ocean.”

“I woke that morning in a rest stop in New Jersey, and was making good time, the traffic moderate. Then I saw a four-wheeler on the southbound side drive into the median. I figured it was a cop turning around. I knew he had no business with me, but I backed it down some and grabbed the CB. ‘Northbound, lookout, we got a plan wrapper swapping over.’ But it wasn’t a cop. A brown car, a Ford Taurus, maybe, comes wailing out of the

ditch, flying at me like a linebacker. Still on the radio, I yell, ‘Look out! Look out!’ like he’s going to hear me in that car. I dropped the mike and swung hard to the right into the breakdown lane and the shoulder. He turned his wheels left, but the car itself seemed to have a bead on me and couldn’t stop its momentum.”

“It didn’t sound like much. A little crunch, like I’d run over a can of beer. No change at all in the momentum of the big truck. I didn’t feel it. So I figured there wouldn’t be much damage, like maybe he had just grazed me and scraped some paint. I eased the big truck down like I was driving on a plane of glass. With the vehicle still, I shut the engine and listened to the quiet. Then I opened the cab, and my steps were all crunched up, the fuel tank mangled, and diesel leaking out over the road. I jumped out to set my triangles and found one of the tires by the fuel tank gone. The wheel was still there, but no tire.”

“I could see the car. It had spun out and come to rest pointing backwards in the hammer lane a couple hundred yards away. Half of it looked squeezed, like it had been pinched. A few people were stopping to help. Until then I had been pretty calm and taken care of things: tried to avoid the car, pulled off the road, warned others, and all that. But with my next responsibility, checking on the other driver, I swear, my knee was going up and down like a sewing machine. I couldn’t breathe. I chose to stay with the truck. I climbed back in the cab and heard on the radio, ‘Northbound Peterbilt, you OK in there?’”

“I said, something intelligent like, ‘Me OK.’ Then I said, ‘Anyone down there can tell me about the driver?’ I couldn’t ask it, but I needed to know if he was still alive. My mind was racing. It wasn’t my fault. My speed had been moderate. He had come out of nowhere and lost control. Silence on the radio. I’m waiting. I’m trembling. I hear a siren behind me, and see the lights by the car. A few minutes later I hear over the radio, ‘They got him covered up with a blanket, driver.’”

“At that moment I knew that for as long as I lived I would be somebody who had killed someone else. I could predict everyone telling me: not my fault, but still. It did not matter that it had just been seconds, a couple heartbeats, and that it was really not my fault. Still, my mind was starting to come round this new fact of my life, and I sort of sagged in the seat.”

“Then another driver came over the radio: ‘But, yeah, he’s moving. He’s pointing at his leg. They’re talking to him. He seems OK.’ I looked out at the pavement before me, at the trees just beginning to bud, where in Alabama they had all been out to leaf. For a moment this was a place I would never have been able to leave, but now I could just appreciate it. I said, ‘Thanks, all right,’ and heard, ‘10-4’ on the reply. Then I guess I thanked God for sparing his life and for sparing mine. I wouldn’t call it a prayer, but I did say a few ‘Oh, God’s’ and let a lot of air out of my system.”

“Mass DOT came by and drained off the diesel. A wrecker pulled the truck and trailer into a lot by a weigh station, and there another driver took the trailer, and the wrecker took the truck to an International dealer. I got to stay in a motel last night. The motel bar

there was full of truck drivers, and I listened to two of them argue about unionizing, for and against. Neither were getting anywhere, and I turned to another guy, and the conversation came around to a point where I could tell my story. I didn't have to pay for any drinks after that. Everyone agreed, if I had swerved left, I might have hit the guy head-on or rolled the trailer on top of him, or I could have missed him but hit someone else. I had done good."

"The company paid for my flight home. They must have a shrink in their head office. They said I needed to 'decompress,' was their word. I weigh 250 pounds. I need to compress a little. But I don't mind a free flight home and little downtime. I want to hug my wife and look at her and know that she is alive, I am alive, and some maniac four-wheeler out there is still alive."

It seemed like enough intimacy for both of us, so we replaced our headsets and listened to the pilot thread his way through the thunderstorms around Chicago. Air traffic control would tell him to bank right to a new course, he would agree, then a couple seconds later the plane would bank right, and Al would look at me with a knowing smile. It was like we could predict the future, like we were not in control, but we had a line in to the source of what was going to happen, like access to God's thought before it becomes manifest, if you think theologically like that.

When we landed and disembarked an announcement came over the terminal intercom that the airport was closing again due to another thunderstorm. Al would have to wait for his flight to Appleton, but I saw him smiling and looking around at the people. I beckoned his attention and said, "Hey, have a good ride on your way."

"Keep her between the ditches," he replied.

"10-4." And I strode off down the wide concourse to the meeting there in the Windy City, maybe not with a glowing aura, but like Al, with a light and easy conscience; grateful I had not killed anyone the day before.

Rev. Kenneth Reeves

Opening words:

One of the ways we support each other is by telling and hearing stories. We UU's tell three stories: a story of human worth, a story of the journey, and a story of connection underlying apparent differences. I think we find support in the affirmation of worth, in the sharing of life's journey, and in recognition of unity underneath separation. So today's sermon involves all three of these stories. Other than that, the sermon might seem a little usual.

I should add that while I believe in the search for truth, I do not always feel bound to the facts.

I offer this service out of my caring for you and my desire to support you on your journeys. I hope that as you journey you find freedom and love and live the full richness of being alive.