

Alone on the Road

After about half an hour of driving I reach I-70 West. 159 miles straight on this highway, then a slight jog on 465 South only to find myself back on my old friend I-70. I'm currently on my way to Effingham, Illinois where I will spend the night and complete my drive to my actual destination, Andover, Kansas. This drive is the only time in my life where I'm forced to be alone and do nothing. I can leave everyone in Columbus, and I have pure freedom until I get home to my parents. This is my time to drive through an interesting town if I want, shop at a random mall, maybe find a cool roadside store. I'm on my time.

The first quarter of today's drive is full of good size suburbs, corn fields, and trucks stops which you'd expect to see in the Midwest. Everywhere still looks like home but not quite. Then, all of a sudden, something terrifying happens; you leave Skyline territory. For anyone unaware, Skyline is a restaurant pretty much exclusively within a 3-hour radius of Cincinnati. Skyline sells what is referred to as "Cincinnati Chili" but as a proud Cincinnati I would describe it more as a meat sauce. It's truly beautiful. Once you leave the comfort of the Skyline Circle, you enter Indianapolis.

The only real interesting thing about the place is Lucas Oil Stadium, which is honestly the only reason I know I'm in Indianapolis. It gets bad when you leave the city. Everything vanishes. Need a gas station? Good luck. Hungry? Sorry dude. Any sign whatsoever of humanity? Doubtful. This is the part of the drive I both hate and love. By now whatever podcast I have on has ended, I am hungry, there's no cell service, and it's just me all alone. As you can expect, sometimes this may be a bad thing, and there are moments when it is, but this drive is more like a long meditation. I'm alone, silent, by myself for 36 hours. I'm sure people in L.A. would spend good money on a silent retreat for that long. I get it for the cost of gas and a hotel room.

Along with being meditative, it's also deeply changed how I view the world. In my 13-hour drive, broken up by an overnight stay in a hotel, I think about how many individual people I would see or interact with in some way. Every car on that highway has someone else with their own unique story that nobody I know, nor myself have any part in but for this weird brief moment we cross paths.

I've made this trip enough times that I pretty much stop at the same two hotels. One going there, and one going back. I got to meet some of these strangers. Some quick encounters like the nice man who gave my car a tow when the tire exploded (shout-out Todd). Others I got to know better like Hotel Lady. The same front desk receptionist has given me my room key pretty much every time that I stay at the Effingham LaQuinta. She's a lovely lady who now starts up conversations because I've stayed there enough that we're friends. I've learned about her son, how she and her husband struggle sharing a car, and she vents about how guests treat her. One time, I didn't make it to the hotel until 1:30am and she told me she was worried I had an accident because I had never gotten in that late.

I exit the highway, on this particular drive, around 10pm which was too early for my hotel manager friend. I make a quick stop at the Walmart next door, buy a pint of ice cream and plastic spoons, then check in to the hotel. I'm helped by a curly haired red head kid who truly could not be older than 15. I get to my room, throw on Late Night, dig into the pint of ice cream, and get one of the best night's rests ever. They put some kind of chemical dust on the sheets in hotels to cause the best night sleep I swear. I refuse to believe that mattresses and sheets really make that big of a difference in my sleep therefore it has to be a magic powder.

Day 2 of the drive is always the most boring. You get really bored really fast. For that reason, I try to break it up as much as possible. After about four hours on the road, I stop at a mall in Columbia, Missouri. I have no idea how this mall is in business considering no one is ever there and a third of the stores have closed. I stop here to get breakfast at Panera and walk around Barnes & Noble. I eat my spinach and artichoke souffle from Panera and I make my way across the mall to Barnes & Noble. It was a weekend morning, so it was actually busy for once but not with real shoppers. If it were full of actual shoppers, I'd have hope for this mall's future but alas, these were middle schoolers whose parents dropped them off for the day and don't actually have any money.

After my breakfast and stroll around the bookstore I still didn't feel like getting back in the car. Not being in any hurry, I got a pretzel from Auntie Anne's and sat myself down. The Columbia mall has a beautiful Merry-Go-Round that looks like something from the "Jolly Holiday" scene in Mary Poppins. During this time of year, the Merry-Go Round plays carnival organ renditions of classic Christmas songs. They always sound more beautiful than I expect them to. As I sit there it begins to snow outside. The Merry-Go-Round with the fluffy white snow falling behind it felt way too Hallmark. I realized in this moment, however, that I was truly and deeply happy. I didn't know anyone around me, and no one paid me any attention. I could sit in this moment and fully experience the beauty in it all. The happy Christmas music, reminding me of all the great Christmases I had as a kid, the snow falling which always makes me happy, and a beautiful Merry-Go-Round spinning with laughing children along for the ride. I had left all of my problems 3 states away and new problems were 307 miles in front of me. Right now, in this moment, I only needed to be. That's what mediation is; just being present in the moment.

After an hour staring at this Hallmark-esque scene I decide, begrudgingly, that it's time to get back on the road. Between Columbia and the Kansas border I call the Hypocrite Belt. Every time I see a giant billboard with "God Hates Gays" or some other bastardization of the Christian faith to justify their hatred for anything seen as different, it is always in the parking lot of a Lions Den or some other adult themed store. This brings me great joy on this trip. This part of America wants you to think they love God, but in actuality they just use Him as justification to be an ass. On this trip though, none of this bothers me. I'm still riding the high of my first truly meditative experience trying to figure out how I can feel that warm feeling that is all too rare for me. Mile after mile, hour after hour, I sit in the silence of my car trying to keep this feeling going.

I peak into the picture of my fellow drivers, framed by their car windows, to see these people will never see again. For once I feel like I am no one and nothing I do will actually matter and this brings me deep peace, like the peace I'm sure Galileo felt when he discovered that the Earth is not the center of the universe. I feel like a lot of people know this intellectually but not emotionally. Everyone has their own struggles, ticks, triggers, sense of humor, education level, and personal experiences. I also simultaneously realized that almost everyone is intrinsically good. I have absolutely no stories of anyone being unnecessarily rude during any of my trips to the center of the country. Instead, I have the opposite. I've met kind people who are always nice to a stranger because why wouldn't they be? They don't know them and have no issues with them.

Before you think, dear reader, "Well that's not true at all. People only want what's best for themselves," it's important to add that soon after these realizations I hit Kansas City traffic during rush hour. After getting cut off twice and missing an exit because someone wouldn't let me change lanes, I forgot all about my Enlightenment over the last few hours and wished death upon everyone in the city. So, I am like the majority of people and think with the emotional side of my brain.

Once I get out the asylum that is downtown Kansas City I get on a toll road. I-35 could just go straight but instead they had to build the road to twist frequently because drivers were falling asleep at the wheel from boredom. The curves don't make it more interesting, just harder to fall asleep. It's flat nothingness in all directions. There's the occasional roadside oasis with gas, Dunkin Donut's and weird knick knacks, but that's only once an hour for a split second. The rest is grass and cows. Fun fact: Trees are not native to Kansas. Any tree you see was either planted there or is from the seeds of a tree that was planted there. There is so much nothingness that it actual has scenic stops where you can pull off the road, get out, and take pictures. Standing out in the middle of this infinite field I'm speechless. The nothingness is truly beautiful and for the second time today I felt a euphoric meditative feeling. I had escaped mankind. It was me, the herd of cows, and the (now night) sky. I had gotten away from everyone. No politics, no social media, no one else for miles. It had been a year of constant overwhelm. The idea of hopping the fence and running as far as I could without turning back just to be quiet was enticing. Sit in the quiet and recharge my batteries until I was good and ready to come out.

But, knowing my parents would probably freak out if I wasn't home by midnight much less a couple days from now, I decided I should best get on the road. I got in my tired car, started her up one more time, entered the highway again, and spent the last half hour of the drive listening to Zac Brown Band, Van Morrison, and James Taylor. These three are essential listening during this part of the drive for some reason. As Zac Brown sings the lines "Just as free, free as we'll ever be" my car takes the exit off the toll road into my hometown. Away from the freedom I felt these last 36 hours. I had simply just come up for air before I returned to the ocean of society.

Everyone needs to breathe. This drive is mine. The loss of all ego that I feel when surrounded by strangers mixed with the silence of the Great Plains always instills a deeper love for people. Just people as a whole. Their default state is to be kind. They know nothing about me yet treat me well. I think meeting regular people from all walks of life on equal ground is something everyone needs. There's more than just you in this world. We're all along for this train ride of life. Some people are in first class, some in business, and some hanging on for dear life off the back. If there's one lesson, I've learned on these drives that I want to leave you with it's this; get up out of your seat and talk to your fellow train passengers. Talk to as many as you can. You can learn something about how the world works from everyone. Life is a train though and there is going to be that one person who insists on reclining their seat back even though there's clearly no room. It's still cool to keep your knee in this guy's back until he gives up.