

On the road

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

Earlier in the summer, generous friends invited my husband, our daughter and me to visit them on the coast of Maine. Boston was caught in the maw of a hot, humid heat wave, and we eagerly headed north. Over a long weekend, we swam, hiked, walked on the beach and sat talking with our friends on the porch. Our daughter floated in the bay in an inner tube, her nose in a book, her legs in the water. As Maine resident E. B. White put it in *Charlotte's Web*, "Every day was a happy day, and every night was peaceful."

With a Monday morning class looming, we headed back south, rested, relaxed and cool. When we arrived home, our daughter disappeared into her room, clearly intent on some mysterious purpose. My husband and I unpacked, started the laundry, made a shopping list, checked e-mail. Later that evening, our daughter emerged and said, "Mom! We've got to go back to Maine. I felt so much more creative up there!"

What is it about traveling that sets our imaginations free? In the 17th century, haiku poet Matsuo Bashō described how his journeys on foot through Japan gave rise to new ways of thinking and being for him. "Every turn of the road brought me new thoughts," he wrote, "and every sunrise gave me fresh emotions."

If you've ever been on a journey and found words, images, ideas and possibilities unexpectedly blooming inside you, maybe even pushing up through the hard, dry ground of worry over things left undone, you know what Bashō means. He loved the feeling of creative expansiveness that he experienced on the road; he believed that traveling was a crucial part of his spiritual and poetic practice. Unencumbered by possessions, living close to the natural world, Bashō entered more deeply into his poetic vocation, seeking the right words to express the eternal at the heart of the always-changing world.

So much seems possible when we are traveling. We encounter new people and get to know familiar people in new ways as we share meals, chores and adventures. One of the ways Bashō interacted with people he met was to write linked poetry with them. One person would write a haiku, the next would take up an image or an idea

from the first poem as a seed for a second, the third person would do the same with an image from the second poem, and together they would create a chain of poems, each distinctive yet joined to the others through shared words, images and ideas.

This is the kind of thing that can happen in what the theorists of journeys call "liminal space"—the space between departure and arrival, between setting out and returning. Outside of the usual structures of our lives we experience new ways of thinking and new forms of community. We can begin to imagine how we might live differently—more simply or more creatively or more attentively.

As my daughter discovered, though, it can be hard to hold onto the creative possibilities after we return home. I once stood at the edge of the ocean and shouted promises into the crashing surf about what I would do, how I would live, what I would create when I was back home again. Many of these promises remain unfulfilled. Most days I don't even think of them. But I *want* to think of them. I want to honor them and the joyful determination I felt when I made them. I want to rush toward all the days that are given to me just as my daughter rushed into her room, full of plans, after a weekend in Maine.

Bashō's solution was to keep moving. He describes returning home from a journey in late autumn, "but no sooner had the spring mist begun to rise over the field than I wanted to be on the road again." Even while he was still recovering from one journey, he was making plans for the next one.

Is this a solution for us? Certainly there are lots of ways to travel, and not all of them require Bashō's strong legs (on one trip he covered nearly 3,000 kilometers on foot through northern Japan). Teresa of Ávila invited the readers of her *Interior Castle* on an interior journey that even nuns who never left their convent could take. You can travel inward whenever you want, Teresa told the sisters, and you don't have to ask anyone for permission.

Whether we travel across a landscape outside of us or into a hidden landscape within us, or whether we move along the edge where what is inside of us and what surrounds us meet and touch, our journeys remind us that all the space we move through is liminal, that we are always moving between departure and return. We are always on a journey between birth and death, always inhabiting a moment that is a gift and full of possibility. Here is a late-summer promise to shout into the sea: remember.