

Road trips: What memories are for

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 3, 2011](#) issue



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One day in January, my son Jacob and his college roommate Ben were busy packing our family's 11-year-old Subaru wagon. One of their professors had approved their independent project for January term credit. Loosely put, the project was to involve extensive car travel out West to meet and interview creative people for video clips. I read through their proposal; it sounded a bit like Charles Kuralt, only more amateurish—and based on a \$500 budget.

Where would they go? Who would they interview? All that I could tell from some penciled-out destinations was that this 21-year-old Lewis and 23-year-old Clark hoped to meet their interviewees near ski resorts. Did I say that snowboards were strapped to the top of the car?

As with most trips, half the fun is the anticipation and the preparation—that's when dreams are launched and tales imagined. The homemade wooden shelf in the Subaru would allow these two partially shaven men to sleep in the car beneath their luggage. (I remember the text they sent from North Platte, Nebraska, on their first night: it was four degrees above zero.)

In an effort to help with the preparation, I rummaged through bins of backpacking equipment in our basement. Finding a few usable items would be invaluable to a collegian's strained budget. The best part was rummaging together, though Jacob had to listen to a lot of 33- and 34-year-old memories popping out of my mouth. I

couldn't keep quiet. "This is awesome," I said as I pulled out a half roll of toilet paper in a Ziploc bag from 1978. "Oh man, look at this! My camping food list, still typed from my college typewriter." I pulled out a stuff sack with pine needles stuck in the bottom. Were they from Bryce Canyon, or maybe the Sangre de Cristo Mountains? All I knew is they were too precious to shake out and throw away.

We looked at old topographical maps of Colorado, including routes where Jacob happened to have hiked just a couple of years ago. I talked about why I thought that plastic coffee cup was better than a metal one for backpacking. I could smell 12,000-foot air in our basement closet. There was even an unopened bag of Ramen noodles. I probably should have sent it off to the Smithsonian—it's that close to being fossilized.

We disrupted the packing long enough to try out the camp stove on the front porch. With one of us holding a flashlight to guide the other, Jacob and I cooked up a tasty pasta dinner in the frigid air of a January night in Iowa.

Rainer Maria Rilke said that poetry should be composed not of sentiments but of life experiences. It's not enough to have memories. Memories need to take on blood and sinew. They have to find their way into bone joints and skin tissue. Rilke was suggesting that there is a human capacity to share memories in a way that can take on life in another human being. What good are memories that never leave a plastic bin or the confines of one's mind? People are relational beings. Few things in life add up to much that is of lasting significance if we can't figure out the relationships that surround those experiences and achievements. Who cares what we store up, possess or think that we can control? I can't think of a joy in life worth cherishing that doesn't have a relational element to it somewhere.

Faith itself is a relationship, not just beliefs and propositions. Jesus made this clear from his interest in our wholeness over some guarantee that we would follow his teachings.

I watch Christians battle over the Bible and I think, "What are they battling over?" The Bible is a conversation, not our personal possession. You battle only over something you want to possess. How do you possess a conversation?

Sometimes we speak of "possessing" memories. That's not quite right. A precious memory held in a lockbox doesn't release life, at least not the fullness of life of which it is capable. Worthwhile memories get shared. They provoke hints for new life

in another human being. Unlike nostalgia that may idealize the past or freeze a sentiment, a memory is at its best when it unlocks the present. That's why African-American spirituals in antebellum America were so powerful. Their present-tense verb forms kept evoking Old Testament memories that were transforming the lives of the slaves singing them.

When Jesus left his church with a sacred meal, he indicated that it would be the activity of eating that would awaken both the memory of the supper's origin and the actuality of his continuing presence. He connected *doing* with *remembering* so that we wouldn't start believing that the memories alone are enough.

If memories are worth holding onto, they are worth sharing—not in some self-centered fashion, but in a way that works into the bone joints and skin tissue of another person and gives that person life.

I think this happened the night we packed the Subaru.