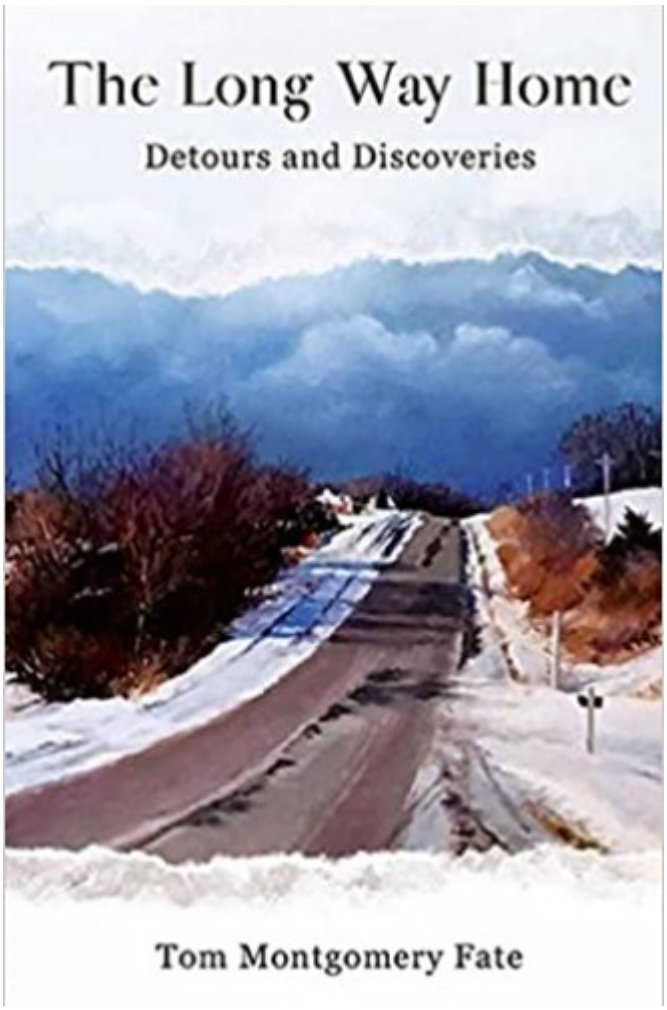
Traveling to find home

Tom Fate’s essays present an ethically complicated journey of discovery.

by Jeannine Marie Pitas in the October 2022 issue

In Review



The Long Way Home

Detours and Discoveries

by Tom Montgomery Fate
Ice Cube Press
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“I’m not a tourist. I’m a traveler.” I heard this claim again and again throughout my footloose early 20s, when I stayed in youth hostels in Madrid, Mendoza, Argentina, and the Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia. I heard it from bearded, sandal-shod men and paisley-skirted women, their belongings stuffed into compact backpacks. We were all hoping to discover some new knowledge or spiritual inspiration that we believed couldn’t be found at home. A tourist was the last thing any of us wanted to be.

This ambivalence about travel haunts Tom Montgomery Fate’s newest book of essays. Grounded in a strong sense of place, *The Long Way Home* begins with an account of Fate’s upbringing in Maquoketa, Iowa, detours through his experiences traveling to Nicaragua and the Philippines during the politically charged 1980s, and then returns to various North American landscapes: the Black Hills of South Dakota, Ontario’s Quetico Provincial Park, and the H. J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon. With curiosity and attentiveness, Fate engages in a passionate search for home: “It’s where my sense of being and my vast longings converge into one thing, something wordless—a kind of knowing, or belief, that I belong to Creation.”

The narrative starts with Fate’s idyllic childhood in rural Iowa. In “Fishing for My Father,” he describes growing up as the son of a Congregational minister and learning that his own faith is tempered by doubt. As a teenager, Fate is hesitant to get confirmed in the church and realizes that his skepticism comes, ironically, from his father, whose Sunday sermons encouraged him to question Christian teachings. “Maybe the problem is that you were the only one who was listening,” his father says, accepting his son’s departure from expectations.

The next essay, “The Presence of Absence,” poignantly fast-forwards to the experience of an adult son caring for his father with Alzheimer’s disease. Referring to Doris Grumbach’s idea that God is found through absence, Fate connects this negative theology to the “growing absence” of his father caused by the disease: “the widening gaps between thoughts, the nonsensical unfinished sentences, the angry outbursts at nurses.” Watching his father forget his Social Security number and the days of the week, Fate takes comfort in the stories his father retains:

> Shucking corn on hot summer days
> until his hands bled during the Dust Bowl. . . . Rushing home from the Navy, at 19, to be with his dying father. . . . Preaching a sermon in Ames, Iowa, in 1964, against Barry Goldwater and the war in Vietnam that would prompt such a backlash he would have to leave that church.

In these stories, Fate finds glimpses of the Divine—the idea of religion as a tie that binds together all creation, living and dead.

Fate's spiritual search leads him to go on a retreat with Trappist monks at New Melleray Abbey, near Dubuque. In "Weekend Monk," Fate confronts a shade of imposter syndrome—that same anxiety which prompts young globe-trotters to wince at the word *tourist*. For Fate, listening to the monks pray and not knowing the words to join in highlights his "distant *looking at*, rather than the riskier *seeing with*. Which is what is so appealing about *tours*—the easy, unearned access to meaning, the fun stuff without the hard stuff." This anxiety continues when Fate visits the Benedictine abbey at Collegeville, Minnesota, where he again feels out of place: "Aside from not knowing which prayer book to use, I wasn't Catholic, didn't really know *how* to pray, or cross myself, or bless myself with holy water, or bow at the right times . . . or anything else." In a lovely turn of events, a kind monk guides him to the right prayer book and assures him that he is welcome in the abbey.

Tourism can be a boon for local communities, but it can also be harmful and destructive. In her essay "A Small Place," Jamaica Kincaid rails against European tourists in the Caribbean as neo-colonizers who keep local communities entrapped in perpetual servitude. And many scholars have exposed the cost of short-term Christian mission trips to the Global South that exist largely to sate missionaries' curiosity and desire to make a difference—often to the detriment of local communities.

These delicate ethical issues run through Fate's accounts of his time living abroad in the 1980s. Inspired by the Sandinista overthrow of a multigenerational dictatorship in 1979, Fate traveled to Nicaragua to cover the revolution and the US-financed Contra war on a press pass from the *Daily Iowan*. Soon after that, he and his wife, Carol (who had accompanied him to Nicaragua and married him there), traveled to teach English in the Philippines, which had also recently overthrown a dictatorship.

In both of these accounts, Fate poignantly expresses a desire to be part of the community while acknowledging that he must remain apart from it. His limitations with language embody a wide gulf of understanding. Meeting the socialist priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, Fate believes he hears him say, “You don’t have to save the world. You just have to see it.” Later, he doubts his interpretation, wondering if Cardenal actually said, “You cannot see the world, so why do you think you can save it?” Fate admits that he goes with the interpretation that makes sense to him, the first one.

I would have liked to see Fate delve more into the possibility that the second statement was closer to Cardenal’s intentions. Fate expresses humility about his limitations in understanding these two cultures, and he shows awareness of the power and privilege inherent in his position. But I wanted to see a deeper self-probing about his motives for visiting these countries in the first place, as well as a deeper analysis of what he learns in the process. I would also have liked to see further reflection on his impact on the local communities. Is it possible to travel ethically as a tourist, to avoid harming the people in the places we visit? In this age of ecological collapse and growing sociopolitical instability, this is not a rhetorical question.

For me, the strongest essay is near the end of the book. In “Lost and Found in the Holy Land,” Fate describes a visit to his mentor White Lance, a Lakota medicine man who lives on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the Black Hills. Reflecting on the lasting impact of European-American colonization of the Lakota people’s sacred land—embodied in Mount Rushmore, which was completed in 1941 by a member of the Ku Klux Klan—Fate reckons with the harsh realities behind our country’s founding. In 1980, the Lakota tribe won a lawsuit over the theft of the Black Hills. The US government is currently holding $2 billion in a federal trust fund, but the Lakota are still waiting for the return of their land.

After receiving hospitality from his friends and participating in a sweat lodge, Fate expresses gratitude for these gifts while coming to terms with the painful legacy of colonialism. For me, the whole book culminates in this awareness. Driving east through the Black Hills toward his home in Chicago, Fate notices the desolation.

> Where were all the billboards I had noticed on my way west? The tours were all in the other direction. Tumbleweeds drifted across the road. And

> as I watched the turkey vultures rock and drift high above me, scanning the earth for food, I could not remember a time when I had ever felt so small, nor so deeply connected to the whole.

As problematic as leisure travel can be, *The Long Way Home* reminds us that there is value in encountering other cultures, sitting with the discomfort of feeling out of place, and, ultimately, arriving at a new understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and our sense of home.