

I've been **thinking...**



On the Road Again
April 2010

In the last thirty days, I've flown over 40K miles with stops in San Francisco, Philly, Sao Paulo and Melbourne. Being on the road made me think of, well, being on the road—again. Hope you'll indulge a departure from my routine subject matter in this column. Here goes.

I've been thinking about frequent-flier miles.

I'm convinced the guy who dies with the most miles dies tired. And, if he's a Premier Executive with United, he's going through Chicago on his way to heaven—expect some delays.

Having logged a million-and-a-half plus, I admit I'm addicted. Not to the miles but to the rewards travel brings. Sure, there are punishments: cancelled flights (which I can still count on two hands), lost luggage (which, in both instances I left in overhead bins), and missed connections (let's not go there). But all in all, the delights of flying outweigh the alternatives.

Have you ever *driven* across the US? In 1955, Dad drove our family roundtrip from LA to Niagara Falls in his fresh-off-the-lot two-tone green Plymouth. It didn't come with air conditioning but we did have a block of ice on the shotgun floorboard and a Minnequa Indian water bag hanging on the front bumper.

From LA we headed east on Route 66. It wasn't called global warming back then but by Barstow (not halfway to Las Vegas) the temperature reached 115 degrees. The car overheated, Dad fetched the water bag, twisted the radiator cap off too quickly, and seriously scalded his arms. Nevertheless, we fearlessly achieved his goal—weaving in and out of the lower forty-eight, witnessing golf-ball hail in New Mexico, visiting one national park after another, and reading Burma Shave signs along the roads that ran straight as arrows through the cornfields of Iowa. Best of all, we chatted it up with fellow travelers and local yokels while catching fireflies and the travel bug—which I confess I've passed down to my kids.

No, I'm not that good of a parent. I never drove them across the US, though we did endure a few 1,052-mile drives from Seattle to Huntington Beach. By Portland my arm was out of socket from keeping the five kids from killing each other in the back of the Suburban. "Tell David to stay on his side of the car." I did. "Tell Jeff to quit looking out my window." I did. What? Enough already.

While I didn't abandon travel with the kids, I opted for flying them to faraway places, admittedly, in most instances, not all five at the same time. In Israel, Ali and I saw where Jesus lived. In southwest Ethiopia David and I saw how Jesus lived. On the floor of an upper room at Sisters of Charity in Calcutta, Jeff and I sat through vespers—in Italian—and passed the peace with Mother Teresa a few feet away. In Cambridge, we heard Stephan Hawking for a brief moment in time before having tea with theologian John Stott, who had served as chaplain to the queen.

Add watching Filipinos harvest rice on the steep terraces of Ifugao and walking barefoot on the sand floors of the mosque (circa 1400 AD) in Timbuktu. We've shared meals with peasants in China, nomads in Kenya, street vendors in Thailand. We've witnessed the majesty and poverty of Washington DC, advertising deficit disorder in Times Square, and masterpieces at the Art Institute of Chicago. Sandra and I soaked up the whimsy of Gheary's Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A. and Canadians' sense of humor during Montreal's Just for Laughs. And did I mention we chatted it up with fascinating people in each place?

In my more pedestrian business travels, I've taken hospital tours and shared lovely meals with devoted nurses, meticulous pharmacists, dedicated hospital administrators, and brilliant healthcare-technology developers from Boston to Austin, Pittsburgh to Tampa, Sioux Falls, and Palo Alto. So many have enriched my life. None of this could have happened without being cramped for a few hours at a time in 33 B. All the turbulence has been worth it.

You didn't ask, but here are my two rules for the road.

One: Keep the destination in mind.

Not pins on a map. I'm talking about the reason for going to point B in the first place. It might be to pick up some important insight at a conference so you can do your work better from point A. It might be to deliver a lecture that will assist people at point B in fulfilling their missions more effectively. Hopefully it will always include learning about other cultures and subcultures while capturing a few more wonders of our world (be it the world's biggest ball of string or the Eiffel Tower) with your very own eyes. I find these rewards worth the hassle of racking up frequent-flier miles.

Two: Look for delights along the way.

Between points A and B, I've met some truly attentive flight attendants, had plenty of laughs with the retiree across the aisle, and picked up some pretty cool ideas from the executive by the window. I've discovered that many cab drivers in DC can talk NPR (not just listen to it) and I met a hotel desk clerk from Ethiopia that may have had more insight and savvy for shaping international policy than Jimmy Carter showed back in the day.

One flight home, I was intent on reclusivity. Besides, the guy next to me didn't appear all that interesting. When I saw he also had a Mac, I gave in, only to discover I was sitting next to Mr. Burns from the Simpson's—Harry Shearer (*Spinal Tap*). We reminisced about the Los Angeles of our childhood, especially the Dodgers moving our way from Brooklyn. It was better than watching Larry King, conducting my own interview with a captivating, hilarious comedian who had studied at the feet of Jack Benny and Rodney Dangerfield. We talked about what makes things funny. He laughed at my Chihuahua joke, then told me how he witnessed "Mr. Dangerfield" (at least someone respects him) agonize for over an hour to get *one* more word out of a joke to make it better. Well worth the airline ticket.

I'm taking advantage of my frequent-flier miles—while I am earning them.

*On the road again
Just can't wait to get on the road again
The life I love is makin' music with my friends
And I can't wait to get on the road again
On the road again
Goin' places that I've never been
Seein' things that I may never see again,
And I can't wait to get on the road again.*

Willie Nelson
On the Road Again

What do you think?



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