

"ON THE ROAD"
REVISITED:

A PILGRIM'S PRESPECTIVE

Kerouac's first two sentences set the tone and direction of the book. He talks of the miserably weary split-up with his wife and his feeling that everything was dead. I knew the feeling. And I knew that, regardless of which road you travel, there's nothing more important than an understanding companion. Kerouac's Sal Paradise understood my personal journey and through this book we shared the road. He taught me to travel with open eyes, listening, to understand we are all pilgrims sharing the same joys and pains. That our journeys are not unique.

"On the Road" doesn't offer any answers --- but by traveling with Sal Paradise through this book the reader finds that Kerouac does know the terrains of the soul, he knows the questions we all face at different times and in different degrees of intensity. The book reads well. The prose is lean and smooth. He covers days in a paragraph then abruptly it's late night and you're in a Greyhound bus or a flatbed truck rolling through America's midwest and he enters a long discourse on one the 'questions' and provides clues about the answer but in the end gives you a feeling that we each have our own answer. That there is no universal truth. That understanding the question is more important than finding the answer, and making the journey more important than reaching your destination.

I read the book slowly a few pages each day and kept a journal of the passages that sparked recognition of a particular situation, the question involved and my thoughts. The first passage asked me about the direction of my life.

Page 22

"A tall, lanky fellow in a gallon hat stopped his car on the wrong side of the road and came over to us; he looked like a sheriff. We prepared our stories secretly. He took his time coming over. "You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?" We didn't understand the question, and it was damn good question.

I thought about the implications of the question and realized that you have to know the country, the landmarks, before you know your destination. You have to know where you really want to be and what you want to do there. That planning is great until you run out of plans.

But how serious should we be about life, about what we hope to accomplish? We know the potential is there but do we have to lose sight of the things (no matter how frivolous) that give us joy? Dean Moriarty didn't. Carlò Marx explains.

Page 42

"Dean and I are embarked on a tremendous season together. We're trying to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on our minds. We've had to take benzedrine. We sit on the bed, crosslegged, facing each other. I have finally taught Dean that he can do anything he wants, become mayor of Denver, marry a millionairess, or become the greatest poet since Rimbaud. But he keeps rushing out to see the midget auto races. I go with him. He jumps and yells, excited. You know, Sal, Dean is really hung-up on things like that." Marx said "Hmm" in his soul and thought about this."

Your plans are made, the goals set. All your energy will be directed toward achieving your objectives. But have you set aside time for the "midget auto races"?

The next passage dealt with relationships and what they do to you. What's involved in meeting and sharing your life with another person? What happens to you?

Page 81

"I had bought my ticket and was waiting for the LA bus when all of a sudden I saw the cutest little Mexican girl in slacks come cutting across my sight. She was in one of the buses that had just pulled in with a big sigh of airbrakes; it was discharging passengers for a rest stop. Her breasts stuck out straight and true, her little flanks looked delicious; her hair was long and lustrous black; her eyes were great big blue things with timidities inside. I wished I was on her bus. A pain stabbed at my heart, as it did every time I saw a girl I loved who was going the oposite direction in this too-big world. The announcer called the LA bus. I picked up my bag and got on, and who should be sitting there alone but the Mexican girl. I dropped right opposite her and began scheming right off. I was so lonely, so sad, so tired, so quivering, so broken, so beat, that I got up my courage, the courage necessary to approach a strange girl, and acted. Even then I spent five minutes beating my thighs in the dark as the bus rolled down the road.

You gotta, you gotta or you'll die! Damn fool,

talk to her! What's wrong with you? Aren't you tired enough of yourself by now?

Aren't you tired enough of yourself by now? That question struck me as 'revealed knowledge'. Of course, that's it, I fall in love or think I'm in love and I change --- my life changes. Whatever a person is, on his own, changes when he becomes involved with someone. The degree and scope of this transformation depends on the intensity of the relationship. And while it may appear to be an act of volition, it's not; when the spirit moves, you have no choice. The only way to control the situation, the changes that are happening to you is to walk away. But Kerouac's point is --- if you're tired enough of yourself, it's time to transform into whatever a relationship dictates. Maybe a person makes a conscious decision to be with someone not out of loneliness but for a need to change. Or maybe they're both the same thing.

Laura, In retrospect this was the origin for the passage in my 6/23/86 letter to you about the changes in my life, how good they were, and how you weren't supposed to be part of my life just a catalyst to change it --- and if I really believe what I just wrote about walking away from someone as the way to control the changes, how do I leave you and keep the changes? The answer is I won't ever really leave. This whole thing is scary but then it's been that way from the beginning. There's this feeling that I've know you for an eternity and that in some sense you'll always be with me. That 'control' in this situation doesn't depend on walking away but on being distant from you (which translates into time apart; the more time away from you being directly proportional to my degree of control of the situation). This is really interesting but then again you always make me look deep inside for what's really there.

The next topic concerns what does one offer in a relationship? Or what can one hope to offer? You can only offer what you have at the time. Sal explains.

Page 125

"Everything was mixed up, and all was falling. I knew my affair with Lucille wouldn't last much longer. She wanted me to be her way. She was married to a longshoreman who treated her badly. I was willing to marry her and take her baby daughter and all if she divorced the husband; but there wasn't even enough money to get a divorce and the whole thing was hopeless, besides which Lucille would never understand me because I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another until I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer except my own confusion."

Depending on where you are in life, confusion is the only thing you may be able to offer someone (and that can be a lot of baggage for them to carry). It all boils down to what Sal said --- "This is the night, what it does to you".

What is the meaning of love? Sal talks of Dean and Mary Lou.

Page 183

"After my last leaving Frisco he had gone crazy over Mary Lou again and spent months haunting her apartment on Divisadero, where every night she had a different sailor in and he peeked down through her mail-slot and could see her bed. There he saw Mary Lou sprawled in the mornings with a boy. He trailed her around town. He wanted absolute proof that she was a whore."

This is analogous to "Kindred Souls" --- in a way --- it's the 'I-can't-believe-my-lying-eyes syndrome'. This was about Dean so you have to understand the intensity of it all and the fact that Dean wasn't in control. The issue was one of control (which goes to the heart of the meaning of love question).

The uncertainty of being able to succeed in attaining what a person really wants in life causes fear --- the fear to try, to take the chance. Kerouac has Dean talk about this using an Okie family's reluctance to buy a new car (they can afford and very much want but can't force themselves to buy) as the framework for presenting the big question; what do we fear most?

Page 215

"Oh these dumb dumb dumb Okies, they'll never change, how completely and how unbelievably dumb, the moment it comes time to act this paralysis, scared, hysterical, nothing frightens em more than what they want - ".

It only hurts to lose something you really want.

Laura, this is a rough draft without a closing. I've got to get to sleep. I like the book. I hope you do. 8/7/86