

24 Things I Learned This Week (And Some Other, Non-Itemized Thoughts)

1. There is a radio station that plays Taylor Swift 24 hours a day.
2. Don't try to ask for rides in a McDonald's; you will get thrown out.
3. There is at least one truck driver in the United States who has met Banksy.¹
4. Adding 'please' to the end of your sign helps you get rides.
5. If you're sitting in the rain eating Cheetos, someone might take you to Walmart to buy you an umbrella.
6. Missouri is the only state in which it is legal to walk on interstate highways.
7. Sometimes the Holy Spirit will tell people to pick you up; when this happens, just go with it.
8. Former military members are far more likely to pick you up than their civilian peers.
9. Just when you've given up hope, someone will stop.²
10. You can always tell when a mother is driving past you by the unique mixture of rage, pity, and stern reproach in her expression.
11. I am very good at making small talk with racist, white, conservative people.³
12. Some truckstops have bars.
13. Smile!
14. The phrase "you're shitting in tall cotton" means (approximately) "you put yourself in a good position to succeed, and now you are enjoying the benefits of your foresight."
15. Some people do not know that Catholicism and Judaism are two different things.
16. Police officers in St. Louis are both polite and helpful.
17. Hitchhiking in and out of city centers is actually impossible.
18. If you show up at Harold's house at midnight, he will try his best to appear grumpy, but he will fail.
19. It snows in Kansas City in May.
20. Waving at hitchhikers while you're driving past them is probably the shittiest thing you can do to them.⁴
21. All 18-wheelers have outlets for charging phones.
22. Truckers typically drive about 250,000 miles per year.
23. For a hitchhiker, I look unusually trustworthy. But I don't look like Justin Timberlake.
24. I can make my mom cry by surprising her on her birthday.

I'd like to preface the second half of my commentary on my trip with a brief thanksgiving: lots of people in this country are mean, but I was incredibly fortunate to avoid them. The people I did interact with – the eight drivers who gave me rides, the woman who gave me 20 dollars, and the small group of experienced hikers who gave me some Pop-Tarts and a few nuggets of advice – were awesome. I am flabbergasted that I was able to actually pull this off, and it's all thanks to the people who, for whatever reason, decided to be nice to me. So thank you, wherever you are now.

¹ Apparently, he's an arrogant douchebag.

² Unless, of course, no one stops – then you have to convince yourself that you haven't given up hope just yet.

³ This could pose problems for me in the future.

⁴ Besides, you know, picking them up and stabbing them.

I began losing my belief in the fundamental morality of the universe at age six, when I discovered that my teachers were lying about the amount of pretzels left over after snack time so that they could keep them for themselves instead of handing out seconds.⁵ I don't think I will ever be able to travel back to that serene state of trust pre-Pretzelgate, but my experiences hitchhiking have cracked open a small forgotten window of naiveté in my psyche. When you're standing on an on-ramp, the odds that someone will actually pick you up and take you where you want to go are astronomical. When it actually works, when a trucker waves you over and asks if you're headed to Denver, you are briefly overcome by an intense feeling that some powerful being has tilted the axis of the universe in your favor. When this happens over and over again (as it did in Missouri, when I got several great rides over the course of one morning), the feeling is indescribable. Certain athletes – 3-point shooters, home run hitters, scratch golfers – are familiar with this phenomenon: not only can you do no wrong, it seems inconceivable that anything bad could happen anywhere, ever, to anyone.

But just as in sports, hitchhiking hot streaks are just as rare as they are wonderful. While I would recommend hitchhiking to any interested white male – it's inexpensive⁶, it provides for interesting social interactions, and it's a great learning experience for anyone accustomed to a nicer lifestyle – I was surprised to learn that hitchhiking across the country can be unpleasant. At times, it can be decidedly Not Fun. It's stressful and unpredictable, especially in the rain. I found it very difficult not to get pissy when I wasn't getting rides. Then I felt like an entitled shthead for whining about the fact that total strangers weren't giving me things for free.

Plus, the fact that I had a timetable and a very clear set of goals put me at odds with the necessary ethos of hitching. Everyone I know who's hitched told me the same thing: *it's only fun if you're not in a hurry, if you can slow down and take a few days off in a cool place, if you're willing to change your plans based on where your rides are going.* Swattie that I am, I ignored it all and hitchhiked 600 miles a day.

When you're in a hurry, you stick to interstate highways and, more specifically, truck stops. Truck stops are pretty interesting places from an academic perspective – they have their own patterns of acceptable behavior, their own cops, their own ways of ensuring that you can't travel anywhere on foot – but they're not exactly the romantic backdrops for Kerouacian tales of living free.⁷ Unless you have a deep obsession with Slim Jims and the people who eat them, interstates are not the best way to get a good sense of local flavors as you travel across the country.

The most mentally challenging part of the trip was getting my mind around the fact that I wasn't doing this out of necessity. At basically any point, I could have bought a bus ticket, a hotel room, a meal in a restaurant. And since no one in Denver knew I was coming, I could have actually just given up and gone home. In that sense, hitchhiking for me had more in common with my experiences with long distance running than with any other traveling experiences. The main fear

⁵ I told my parents to sue my teachers for lying. They laughed and asked if I wanted some pretzels at home. THAT WASN'T THE POINT. THEY LIED TO ME!!!!

⁶ I spent \$29.44 on the entire trip.

⁷ In fact, truck stops used to be the absolute worst place to hitchhike. As my dad put it, "in the 60s, truckers were on the wrong side of the culture divide. Going to a truck stop with long hair and a backpack was a good way to get shot."

I had to deal with wasn't related to personal safety or financial issues; rather, I was chiefly concerned with the value of the trip itself: *Why did I sign up for this? Why did I go out of my way to go out of my way?* Hour after hour, I was constantly surprised at how much I had to work at maintaining a proper attitude – and how often a positive outlook and the winning smiles that accompany it got me rides.

Although it represented a significant obstacle, I'm grateful for that mental struggle. It demonstrated that the trip was worthwhile – even if it wasn't always enjoyable. Let's not be overdramatic: this trip wasn't some sort of vision quest that freed me from conventional boundaries. But my personal boundaries – my fairly conservative, inflexible boundaries – have shifted slightly. I willingly put myself in situations controlled by complete strangers, and I didn't get stabbed, stuffed, and hung on a wall by a maniacal redneck. Perhaps even scarier, my trip was not and could not be scheduled, prepared for, or accurately forecasted. For someone who packs the day before, who begins training six months in advance, who plans out daily reading schedules, standing out on the onramp to catch my first ride was a truly terrifying experience. That I didn't burst into tears represents progress, I think.

In addition to testing my tenacity in the fact of needless, avoidable, and ultimately ridiculous challenges, hitchhiking made me face my own privilege in both predictable and unforeseen ways. My particular background helped me in all sorts of ways: I'm male, white, and I have enough money to buy my own clothes. To make matters better, I'm young, tattoo-less, and try as I might to avoid it, I convey a certain degree of guilelessness to strangers. Most people in America can't do what I did. And while I will never forget the wonderful people who helped me, I have to recognize that they wouldn't have picked me up if I were Black, or if I were gay, or if I were actually homeless instead of pretending to be. As one trucker put it while explaining why he made an exception and picked me up, "you don't look desperate. And that can make all of the difference when you're standing on the side of the road."

So will I do it again? Probably not. After she wiped away her tears⁸, my grandmother told me I should probably quit while I'm ahead. Plus my parents just bought me a plane ticket home.

May 2013

Starting	Ending	Mileage	Driver
Delaware Water Gap, PA	East Stroudsburg, PA	4	Former Thru-Hiker
East Stroudsburg, PA	I-80 and I-476, PA	29	Trashy Pickup Truck
I-80 and I-476, PA	Ann Arbor, MI	510	Old Trucker
Ann Arbor, MI	St. Louis, MO	495	Sioux Trucker
St. Louis, MO	Columbia, MO	77	Bus Driver
Columbia, MO	Boonville, MO	25	Old Hippy
Boonville, MO	Kansas City, MO	103	Ex-Marine
Kansas City, MO	Denver, CO	605	Christian Trucker

⁸ Of joy, I'm pretty sure.