One of my favorite movies is *Pulp Fiction*. At the end of this movie, one of the main characters gives up his life of crime to “walk the earth” upon receiving inspiration from what he felt was divine intervention. Taking road trips is like walking, or rather, riding the earth to me. It is something that I will always do because, like the character from *Pulp Fiction*, it is how I find sense of self. It is how I put my life into perspective. It is also a way to see a new part of myself with every turn. Most of all, it is a way for me to get a feeling for my home outside the bounds of my every day life. I know that there is so much more out there to be seen and done. What better way to do it than being your own tour guide? The road never sleeps, it is always beckoning its travelers. Millions of people drive great distances without ever really leaving. They have never seen the open road. Mileage means nothing if it cannot tell you something.

LEARNING THE REAL MEANING

by

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My favorite part of each summer was the Fourth of July. My parents were teachers, so our summers were spent traveling to new places and learning new things. But no matter what my family was doing each summer, the Fourth of July never changed. There was always a parade in the morning, with the loud marching bands and Uncle Sam on stilts. We always went to the carnival in the afternoon; I liked the wild rides, but had trouble finding anyone to ride with me. Dinner was cooked on the grill and we never missed the fireworks. We would sit in the grass on our blankets, and gasp and applaud as the thousands of exploding lights would ignite with a BOOM! Rain or shine, if the fireworks were on, we were there.

The summer before my freshman year in high school I got the opportunity of a lifetime. The problem was I didn’t know that at the time. My parents had saved and planned and were taking my brother and me to Europe and England. We would spend one glorious month traveling abroad, and all I could worry about was leaving my boyfriend! Not to mention the fact that we would be gone for the Fourth of July. Who wants to spend the Fourth in a place where it is just like any other day?
We left the third week of June and our first stop was Amsterdam. Even though I was still slightly traumatized about leaving home and by the thirteen hour plane ride, I was very excited about our first destination in Europe. We were going to visit the World War II hideaway of Anne Frank. I had read her diary several times, first for a school assignment, and then as a young girl of similar age and mind. Amsterdam surprised me. The homes and the businesses were built right up next to each other, crammed in like sardines. The aged beauty of the streets astounded me. It was like walking through a doorway into a time long ago. We had to wait in line for what seemed like hours to get in to Anne Frank's; the place only accommodated about twenty people at a time. I thought I knew what to expect, but I was wrong.

The diary depicted a hidden stairwell. It was more like a ladder and extremely narrow. When I got inside, I expected a small apartment, but I wasn't even close. All four rooms put together were no bigger than this classroom we are in today, maybe even smaller. The idea that so many people existed together in such a minuscule place, constantly quiet, fearing for their lives, was inconceivable. As I stood in the center room and gazed into the glass casing holding Anne's movie star pictures and other personal items, I tried to imagine how awful it must have been for her. Tears welled in my eyes and a lump formed in my throat. For a moment I wanted to cry for the life so cruelly taken from her, but I didn't. I walked out instead.

My momentary depression did not last long as we set out down the western coast of Europe. A few days later we were in Germany. We took a guided tour on a bus full of people. The final stop on the tour was Dachau, a German concentration camp. We drove a long way across some of the most fertile and green countryside I have ever seen, even to this day. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I saw a black iron fence with an arched gateway. Inside the arch there were three words, "Arbeit Macht Frei." My mother told me it read, "Work shall set you free."

The scenery wasn't very impressive as we drove through the gate. There were about four large buildings standing, and lots of open field covered in wildflowers. The sun was shining and the flowers smelled beautiful; it just didn't seem like the horrible and frightening place I had only read about. As our tour began, we heard stories of the unbelievably inhumane treatment and murder of the hundreds of thousands of people who were prisoners there. We went through one of the buildings, but there was not much to see. The next structure, however, would be completely different, and I was totally unprepared. It was where the women "lived." You could still smell the urine and human defecation. It was permanently dark, damp and cold. The worst was yet to come though; the next building to the left was the "showers."

As we entered the room, the stench was overpowering and unmistakable. It was gas. An elderly man behind us started to sob immediately and uncontrollably. I turned around as soon as I heard him, to see him leaning with his back against a wall and his fists over his eyes. A woman was beside him, saying something in a language I didn't understand. Somehow, though, her message was perfectly clear. When I looked at my parents my mom had tears streaming down her face and my father was looking at the ground. Thirty-five years had not been able to
erase the stench, the horror of this place. I have re-lived that scene many times in my life, and I often wonder, fifteen years later, if it still smells the same. We were told that the wildflowers covered the mass graves, and all of a sudden, they weren't beautiful at all. This day was the first time ever that I formally thanked the Lord for my life.

The morning of July Fourth found us in London. I had been enjoying my trip, despite my initial misgivings, but I was still homesick on this day. We had been sightseeing furiously, attempting to see a lifetime of places in just under two weeks. Today we would see the Tower of London. I was a big fan of the story of Anne Bolyn, and as this was the place where she was beheaded, I was really looking forward to seeing this. I also couldn't wait to see the Crown Jewels, and the tiara that Lady Diana would wear in her wedding later that summer. Most of our time in London had been foggy, rainy, and even a bit on the cold side considering it was July. But this day was different. It was bright and sunny, and we took our jackets off as we waited outside to get in. I was wearing a cowboy hat that belonged to my father, and as we waited we were approached by another family. "You all wouldn't be from Texas, would you?" the man said with a heavy southern drawl. "No, Chicago" we replied with a laugh. "Well, happy Fourth of July anyway" the man chuckled. He and his family were also on vacation from the United States. We stood outside and chatted about our trips and homes until the gates opened.

As we walked through the tower, one of the Beefeater Guards near the Crown Jewels looked at me and grinned. "Hey!" he bellowed. "Happy Independence Day to the Americans! Will you be eating turkey today?" It struck me as odd that he would think that we ate turkey on the Fourth of July, so I told him "We eat turkey on Thanksgiving, not Independence Day." My explanation fell on deaf ears because the crowd moved us along, but the last two words I had spoken hit me like a rock in the very pit of my stomach.

Today wasn't the Fourth of July; it was Independence Day. It didn't have anything to do with parades, carnivals, or dinner on the grill. It was all about not having to hide in fear for your life, simply because of religious differences. It meant not dying a slow and torturous death in a concentration camp, having committed no crime. Today was about freedom, the independence to be who you are, no matter who that is. This is a day so special and so monumental to America that even a royal guard in England is aware of the significance of the fourth day of July.

Dinner that night was from a corner sandwich shop, and I smiled to myself as I ordered turkey. We sat in the park on a hill and watched the setting sun while we ate our dinner. As I leaned back on the hill, I thought I could almost hear the fireworks.