



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 8 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Man of Fire

California/Mexico 2015

The initial purpose of the trip is to meet my two-month-old granddaughter in California. There is also a need to escape to warmth and sunshine from the coldest Montreal winter in 120 years. The plan is to spend one week in Los Angeles, then visit Guadalajara and Guanajuato, two cities in central Mexico.

It's February 24, 2015, and after a long day of travel I'm in my motel room by midnight and in bed by 1:30. At first glance, Lynnwood in southeast Los Angeles is poor and sketchy but it's very close to a freeway entrance. My son is actually worried about me staying in this neighborhood because I'm told there are neighborhoods here that light-skinned people are supposed to avoid.

In the morning, after a huge breakfast in the Mexican fast food restaurant down the street, I drive to Venice where a long walk on the beach in the warm sun, with the sounds and scent of the ocean, soon restore me. In the afternoon I visit the Self Realization Fellowship in Pacific Palisades, a sanctuary built for Paramahansa Yogananda, whose famous book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, is said to have been the only book found in Steve Jobs' I-Pad after his death, and the first book I acquire on this trip. There are shrines and quotations strewn about the sanctuary, including one that could be the theme of any pilgrimage: *Everything else can wait, but our search for God cannot wait.*

The compound is pleasant enough and very pretty with careful landscaping and a small lake full of turtles. Once again, I feel restored by the rich smells of plants and flowers, the smells of life that are buried or shut down in the cruel winter I just escaped. There are people meditating on the grounds, some in the familiar official harem pants of yoganauts everywhere, others dressed like regular people.

It's all very peaceful and quiet, but this being LA, the muffled whoosh of traffic is always in the background and the lake, meant I think to be emerald green, looks more like pool-table felt up close. The most interesting thing is the Gandhi shrine which actually contains a portion of the Holy Man's ashes. The temple at the top of the hill is spotless and, like everything else, a bit too perfect. I'm not sure I would come here very often if I lived here, and the photos I take will be disappointing.

Finally, at 5:30, I meet my granddaughter. The visit with my son and his family is very good, gratifying at an instinctive level. I had felt the need to hold the baby in my arms and count her fingers and toes as soon as I heard of her arrival in this world, and now the wait is over.

Lynwood looks depressing in the morning of Day 3. The storefronts that are not shuttered and decaying – Laundromats, liquor stores, a minimart and a tattoo parlor – all look hopelessly drab and advertise acceptance of food stamps. The neighborhood seems to be populated entirely by Latinos with a few Afro-Americans. By far the ugliest thing about the neighborhood, as with most of LA, is the cars and the incessant sounds of traffic which I can hear even from my motel room.

You can't do anything here without getting in a car and sitting in the long, snake-like parking lots they call freeways. The author of a book I will find tomorrow will say that "people here don't walk anywhere. They get in their cars to go to the bathroom."

The book on racism and genocide I began the trip with, *Exterminate all the Brutes* by Sven Lindqvist, is one more account of horrible atrocities committed by greedy misfits with guns and dreams of glory. More than once in the three days I will spend in Lynwood, I will see people being arrested by the LAPD on the sidewalk. It's been said that 98% of the mind-boggling 2.4 million Americans who live in prison were raised in poverty and that "tough on poverty" policies would prove much more effective than "tough on crime" policies.



Venice



The Self Realization Fellowship

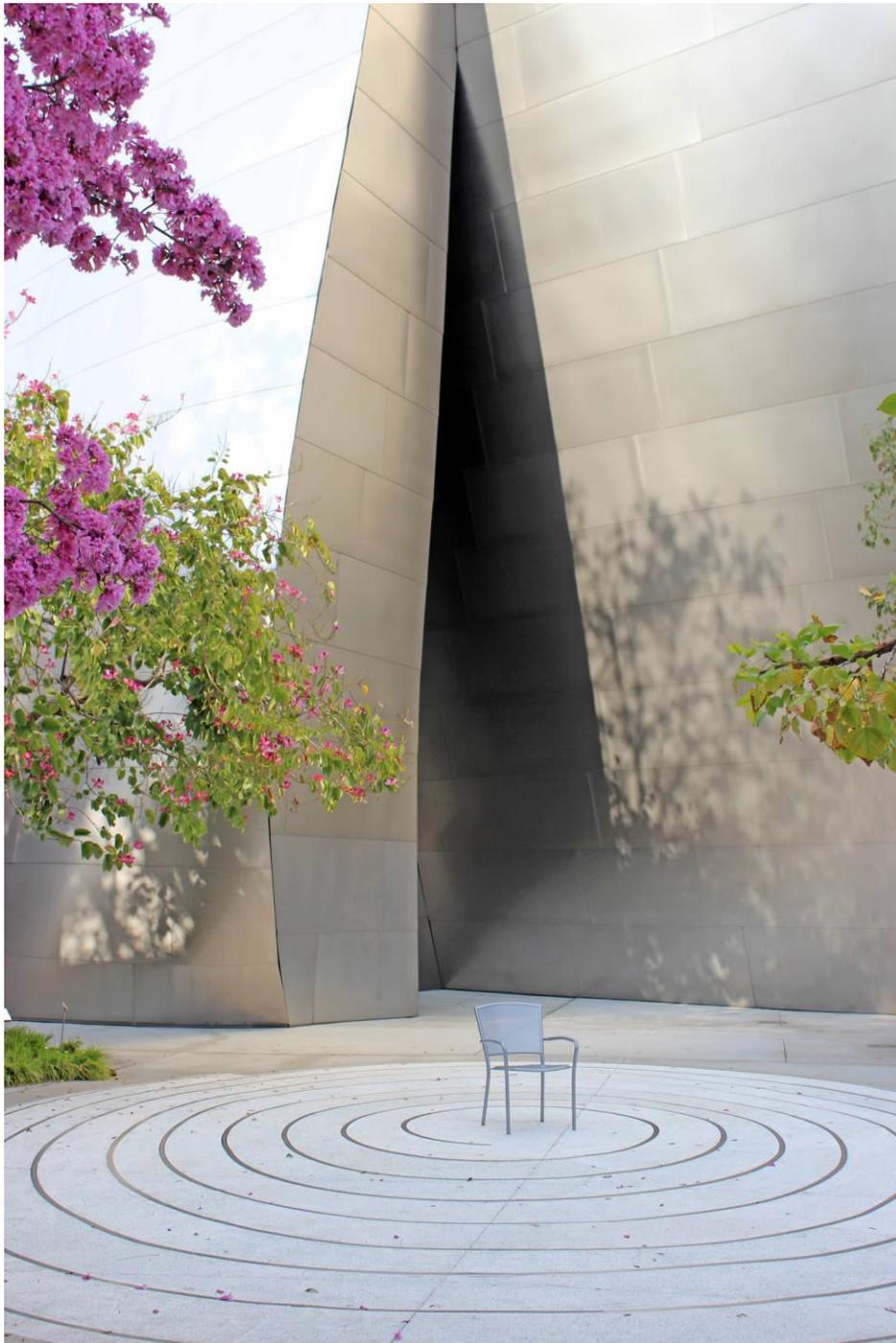
I meet my son and his business partner in downtown Orange. Both insist that I need to go to Disneyland during my visit. After lunch I drive into downtown Los Angeles which takes me through skid row where there are literally hundreds of homeless people on the sidewalks and in the streets. You see homeless people everywhere in California but this looks like a refugee camp with permanent-looking tents set up on the sidewalks.

I find *Mail for Mikey* by Orson Bean at the Last Bookstore which bills itself as California's largest used bookstore, then wander around the downtown area for three hours. I find the strange-looking Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall and slowly walk around it, getting a couple of nice shots. The structure is covered in beautifully shaped polished steel panels but when I rap one with my knuckles the sound is hollow.

The rest of downtown is pretty depressing. The Los Angeles Public Library is big and impressive but I'm not sure how much the general population ventures downtown to use the facility: almost all the clients today look poor or homeless with lots of men in wheelchairs (army vets, I presume).

A book of Reverend William Sloan Coffin quotes I will find later in the trip will be critical of rich Americans who call themselves Christians but act in the most un-Christian ways. Many believe in the so-called trickle-down economic theory which has led to the obscene and growing gap between rich and poor. Coffin wonders "how Jesus would scorn an economic theory that says we must heap more on the platters of the rich, for only so will more crumbs fall to the poor." He reminds Christians proud to display their wealth that they are meant to imitate the life of Christ and "let us remember that Jesus – who influenced history more than any other single person, institution or nation – died, his sole possession a robe."

In the evening, back in Lynnwood, I walk down a mostly deserted Long Beach Blvd. to a convenience store (there is nothing like a proper supermarket in sight) to find something to drink and maybe something light for breakfast the next morning. The store is shabby, like everything else on the street, but the clerk, a young fourteen or fifteen-year-old girl, is cheerful and helpful. She has a textbook open on the counter in front of her as she talks about school to an older man, a father or uncle I guess, and she looks completely at ease.



The Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles

She helps me choose something not too sweet from a small cabinet of breads and pastries and asks if I have an opener for the bottle of Mexican pineapple soda I have chosen (she know of course that I'm a tourist). I shake my head and she gives me a lovely little red opener/key chain in a small plastic bag. I can't help but think this bright, vibrant young woman is the future of this part of the world.

Tomorrow I go on a mini-road trip to the Salton Sea, then return on Sunday for another day with family. The plan is to drive down the eastern side of the Sea (the side where the shore is accessible), spend the night in El Centro near the Mexican border, then drive back up along the same route the next day. I've done this sort of double-take before with interesting places. It provides an opportunity to get photos in the different circumstances of morning and afternoon light, and to appreciate how everything looks slightly different the second time around.

The thing I will remember most about the accidentally-created Salton Sea will be the smell, a combination of salt water, dead fish baking in the sun, and an overabundance of algae caused by agricultural run-off from surrounding farms. They say the sometimes overwhelming smell of sulfur is caused by gasses emitted by bacteria attracted to the algae: the farts of billions and billions of bacteria. The algae are killing tons of fish but the sea is still teeming, mostly with Tilapia. The sea, which is actually technically a lake, is more than 200 feet below sea level and a place of interest to more than 400 species of migratory birds, more than anywhere else in North America.

Shimmering blue from a distance, up close the water has an eerie brown/bronze hue. Most of what looks like white sand at water's edge is actually pulverized fish bones. I am walking on the crunchy remnants of countless dead fish. I guess this is what all dust and dirt is: accumulated dead things. Someday people will be walking on me.

The drive south along the eastern shore of the sea is wonderful. There are plenty of places to stop and take photos – there's even a Visitor's Center with an attractive fridge magnet featuring a pelican. There's hardly any human settlement in the area except for the strange post-apocalyptic town of Bombay Beach with its abandoned buildings, and the town of Niland where the special at the Buckshot Diner is, of course, fish and chips.



After lunch I drive a couple of miles into the desert to Salvation Mountain, a massive work of Christian folk-art created by the late Leonard Knight, one of the Mad-Max types who live off the grid a bit further up the road in Slab City. Here was someone who clearly believed his life had a purpose, a single-minded genius 100% devoted to leaving something big behind.

There are a handful of visitors at the unsupervised site and everyone is respectful, including a couple of newlyweds posing for photos at the very top of the mountain. The place is magical but the wind is picking up and eventually the dirt starts to blow, which will give all of my photos a brownish tinge. I can actually taste dirt (death?) in my mouth and worry with good reason about specks of dirt blowing into the camera.

Finally, the wind is too much to bear and I decide to find my motel. On the road south I notice a border control station on the other side of the highway that I will have to pass through on my way back and for a moment have a nervous thought that maybe they won't let this old Canadian return.

El Centro might as well be Mexico. Even at the Chinese restaurant where I pick up some dinner I hear no English on either side of the take-out counter. The meal ends up being at least three times more food than I could possibly eat but costs the same as an equal-sized container of chopped fruit I almost purchased in a supermarket. The Lindqvist book is getting boring and repetitive. I decide to skim to the end and move onto the Bean book.

It's still windy in the morning of Day 5 but not as bad as yesterday. I'm better prepared on the way back to see all there is to see on the Salton Sea. Empty and flat dirt roads lead to Obsidian Butte which is deserted and wonderful. From the top of the black, rocky hill the views are spectacular and I can see quite clearly that there is not another person within miles of where I stand. I travel for moments like these, alone on top of the world, and I will get some wonderful shots today.

At Bombay Beach I ask a lady in a convenience store for directions to the entrance of the man-made berm that hides the actual beach which the Web says I can drive onto. The directions are simple: just turn right on Avenue E and there it is at the end of the road. I finally find the post-apocalyptic remains of the resort on the edge of the water, but the car gets stuck in sand when I try to follow what looks like a path further down the beach.



Obsidian Butte, Salton Sea

With wheels spinning, sand flying and not a person in sight in this desolate place, I feel like I'm in a bad dream. The wheels are buried up to the underside of the small car and I desperately try to kick away sand but it just pours back into the holes created by the spinning wheels. Where am I going to find help around here?

Finally, I get back in the car and keep turning the wheels all the way to the right and left and flooring the pedal till I get some traction and manage to free myself, covered in dust and sand, from what could have been a very sticky situation. The relief is warm and embracing and I spend the rest of the afternoon slowly driving north, stopping whenever possible to appreciate the beauty of this strange place.

On the way back to a room booked in Anaheim, I drive through a windy valley surrounded by hundreds, maybe thousands, of gigantic windmills. It's threatening to rain and large random drops dot the windshield, but the sun is shining through an opening in the dark clouds above the hills to the west and the rays of light illuminating the scene are magnificent, almost celestial. If only there were a place to stop on this freeway, I could get a shot for the ages. But signs specifically prohibit stopping on the shoulder for anything but emergencies and when I do finally pull off at an exit, the light and everything else that made the scene so magical are gone. More proof that time spent on these wretched California freeways is time utterly lost.

In the evening I have a long talk with the friendly Indian-American owner of my motel who tells me that 60% of the motels in the U.S. are owned by Indians, many of them named Patel, which indicates the land-owning caste back in India. I've noticed (as have others on hotel-review sites) that American motel lobbies often reek of curry and the owner tells me that he usually cooks in a small facility he built at the end of the parking lot and uses air-freshener machines to deal with the smell in the lobby.

He says the motel business is a perfect mom-and-pop family enterprise, with free living quarters provided. His ambition is to own a bigger, four-star hotel, a "Marriott product" as he calls it. He is a perfect example of the American immigrant who sees this country as a land of unbridled opportunity and proceeds to make it so. He says that poor Americans don't seem interested in hard work.



Bombay Beach

I drive a couple of miles to a Ralphs Supermarket found with my GPS gadget but it turns out to be a Mexican supermarket instead. I'm probably the only gringo in the huge market but I don't feel out of place and find it really interesting, with Latino music playing and exotic prepared foods that I don't recognize. There's a restaurant counter with plenty of tables and diners and the general atmosphere is colorful and festive. All of this in a neighborhood just minutes away from Disneyland.

I finally finish the boring Lindqvist book, skimming ahead to the last chapter. Without extermination, he says, the so-called brutes (dark-skinned natives) quickly gain ground with hard work and community and eventually take over - a kind of reverse-imperialism very evident in this part of the world. Demographics predict that California will be majority Hispanic in a few years.

The book is a kind of retelling of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness*. Lindqvist says we already understand that the darkness is inside of us - this need to see others as sub-humans who exist to be exploited and are somehow simultaneously a threat to our civilization. "It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and draw conclusions."

It rains heavily throughout the night and in the morning of Day 6, on my way to the donut shop down the street in search of coffee and a bun, I see a homeless person's shopping cart with belongings soaking wet, and two other guys who might be homeless standing outside the shop holding coffee cups. One has a bicycle and a smartphone. Homeless people on bikes with smartphones: is this another California subculture?

English 10:30 mass (preceded and followed by Spanish masses) at St. Boniface is packed with hundreds of people in attendance. The service is nothing special and the sermon is the story of Abraham being told by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. He's about to do it - he's got the boy tied down and the knife in his raised hand - when God changes his mind at the last second. Apparently, Abraham was being tested and already knew he couldn't lose Isaac permanently because God had already promised him offspring through Isaac.



I don't like the story very much. I had a girlfriend who would say *I love you* several times a day and take exception when I wouldn't respond with an *I love you too*. It not only felt like I was being tested, it felt like her doubt was entirely for her own love (or lack of love) for me. And Abraham's test was fixed anyway – he had a guarantee that nothing bad would happen.

I see family again in the evening. My son and I pick up Ethiopian take-out food and it's good to hang out with him, his wife and the baby.

Mission Disneyland is aborted on the morning of Day 7. I had thought the rain might be light and intermittent but the skies look ominous and the cloud cover is heavy. As I drive by the entrance, parking looks like it might be complicated as well and it seems I would have to walk a long time after paying – not a good way to begin an already expensive experience which I'm not even sure I wouldn't find repulsive.

Moments after I drive by the entrance, very heavy rain begins and I find another café (inevitably another Starbucks) and decide to sit out the storm, then maybe drive up the Pacific Coast Highway to see the Queen Mary ocean liner and the Space Shuttle Endeavour. Maybe I'll die without ever seeing Disneyland. Disney epitomizes California and a special brand of American optimism that verges on delusional. He created a fictional, idealized vision of a small-town America that never existed. When I was a child in the fifties and early sixties, I bought into this vision 100% and actually fantasized about running away to live in this other Technicolor dimension that seemed so much more vibrant and interesting than my own black and white world. Maybe it's better not to tamper with these old, dormant yearnings.

Disney also took old European cautionary fables and changed the gruesome endings. This happyendingification of timeless tales explains a lot about the "American dream" that seems to resonate even among the disadvantaged in a country with so many poor and homeless people and gated communities for the super-rich. William Sloane Coffin says that "foreigners... are often struck at how many Americans think privilege is something earned or deserved." They almost never see it as a form of theft.



The strangest thing Disney did was to relentlessly anthropomorphize animals into happy and excessively cute creatures that can walk and talk just like us. This might help explain the obsessive relationships we have with pets in the western world. There is not one, but three, pet cemeteries on Beach Boulevard in Anaheim: a testament to how twisted these relationships can become. I'm told that you see far more visitors in these cemeteries than in human cemeteries.

After the storm, the rain slows to a drizzle but the sky is still 100% grey. I linger a little longer in the café, then drive straight down Beach Boulevard to the ocean.

I'm enjoying the Bean book, which is full of entertaining and intelligent one-liners in fictional emails addressed to Mikey, the narrator's young AA sponsee. He talks to Mikey about how to approach religion as a non-believer and says to just do it: get down on your knees in the morning and evening simply because God seems to like it when you do. Once you start, belief may follow. It's a rephrasing of the "fake it till you make it" twelve-step strategy, and it rings true. Later I will read something very similar in the Coffin book where the Reverend says, "First you leap, and then you grow wings." It seems that faith, like love, is an action, not a word, thought or emotion.

Bean compares the ego to a doorman who wears a fancy suit and likes to pretend he's in charge. "My ego is the bouncer in front of God's disco," he says. He says handicapped people seem happy because they are free of delusions of getting past the doorman. Without these delusions, they find themselves suddenly past the doorman and in the disco. Ego keeps us from seeing the truth.

The rain stops and by the time I get to the ocean the sky has cleared and the sun is out in full California glory. In fact, down here close to the water there had been heavy hail which now looks like snow on the sand and the road. People everywhere are excited and talking about the phenomenon. The "snow" is quickly melting and I see one man actually shoveling some into the back of his pick-up truck. (To keep as a souvenir maybe?) I have never seen the air so clean in Los Angeles. The ocean is sparkling and I get a couple of gorgeous shots at Huntington Beach.



Huntington Beach

I linger on the beach for a long time and decide to forget about Queen Mary and the space shuttle. The air and light and sea are more than enough for a Canadian winter refugee. Eventually, I will leisurely make my way back to Orange County for one last evening with loved ones, one last opportunity to make family connections to last until the next time.

On Day 8 I'm flying to Guadalajara. I finish the Bean book on the plane and find the last few chapters very touching. I'm not sure why. Maybe because they ring true and he manages to write about Jesus without ever getting vague, cheesy or sentimental. He describes his own experiences with miracles in the same simple, humorous and matter-of-fact way, and presents no complicated arguments to support or promote faith.

He says if we can believe in "fact-less science" like the Big Bang Theory which suggests that the universe emerged from the explosion of an infinitesimally small, infinitely hot, infinitely dense "something", why not believe in God? He describes Jesus as a friend and protector, an intermediary between us and the Creator. Bean is a smart and witty entertainer who lives in Los Angeles, the land of the non-believers. Coming out as a Christian apparently took courage. He makes me feel like I should be more honest about this sort of thing in my own writing and in the way I speak to my "godless" children, the people in my life for whom it is actually my job to impart whatever I know.

Guadalajara at first glance is more foreign than expected and hardly anyone I meet is able to speak English. My four-star hotel room is beautiful, amazingly cheap and very close to the Historic Center of the city, which I walk to before returning for dinner in the hotel restaurant. The weather back home is forecast to remain unusually cold for the rest of the month and I'm happy and comfortably smug to be here where it's sunny and warm.

I return to the Historic Center first thing in the morning of Day 9 and take a 90-minute guided tour bus to familiarize myself with the city. I'm the only gringo on the packed double-decker bus and wonder if I'm the only gringo in the city. The driver reluctantly adds an English language version of the recorded commentary but I can't hear a thing because as soon as the Spanish commentary ends, the Mexican tourists start to talk and laugh and sing, obviously having a great time (something that seems to come very easy to them).

In the afternoon I find the Roma Bookstore where I'm offered a much-appreciated beer as I browse the English used books. The heat is starting to get to me and it's only 27 or 28, but I haven't been exposed to the sun for months and at this altitude it quickly burns. I find *Credo*, a book of quotations of the American Reverend and activist William Sloan Coffin.

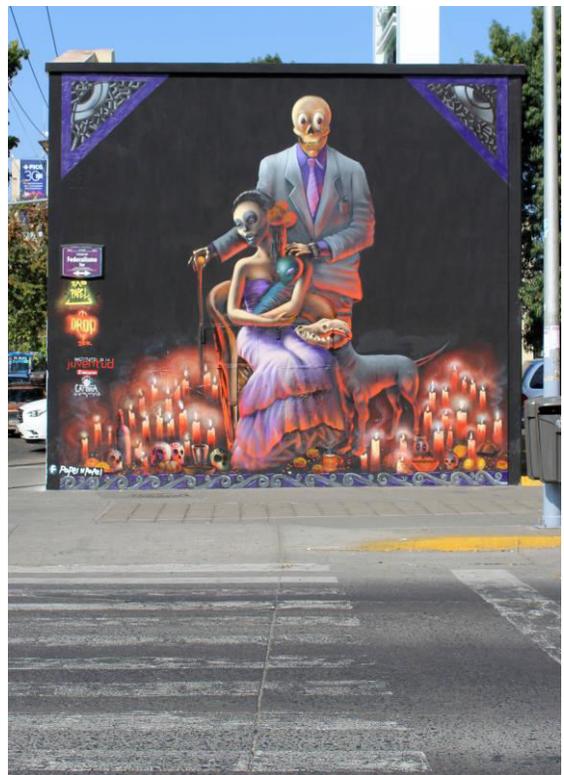
I experience a rare moment of loneliness, feeling a bit isolated and cut off - far from home and very white. Eventually clouds appear and it actually rains a little in the afternoon. In the evening I take a couple of hours to make arrangements for the rest of the trip. I book an Airbnb room in Guanajuato and a "luxury bus" for the four-hour ride. I'm feeling slightly down in dusty Guadalajara and reluctant to admit I'm missing the presence of other tourists.

In the morning of Day 10 I buy a ticket for the hop-on-hop-off bus where I spend most of the day, with a long stopover for lunch in Tlaquepaque, where there are actually quite a few gringo tourists. It's full of shops and restaurants and I'm able to find a fridge magnet easily.

I'm tired throughout the day and fall asleep on the bus and on benches three times. I love double-decker hop-on-hop-off buses. The only problem sitting upstairs is overhanging electrical wires and trees. I imagine one day being electrocuted or decapitated by a random branch on the roofless upper floor of a hop-on-hop-off bus and think it wouldn't be a bad way for a pilgrim to go.

The Lundqvist book is beginning to seem very relevant in retrospect. Maybe nowhere more than Mexico are the layered effects of colonialism more apparent. Even the name, Guadalajara, derives from Andalusian Arabic, from a time when Spain itself was colonized by foreigners. There are so many different kinds of people here, so many natives and others with native blood. The Web tells me that only 16% of the population is pure European, and huge disparities still exist.

After stomach trouble during the night, I begin Day 11 a bit late but a little less tired than yesterday. It's a short walk up to the impressive Templo Expiatorio and it's a short visit as well with not much to see aside from the impressive Orozco murals on the ceiling of the auditorium of the University of Guadalajara next door. The weather is perfect and I'm still savoring the escape from the cold.



I've got my good camera today and plan to move real slow and keep my eyes wide open, eat little and stay in the shade as much as possible. I've been using my pocket camera so far so as not to be such an obvious tourist, but I now feel perfectly safe in this city.

In the afternoon I walk through the Historic Center one more time, all the way to the Instituto Cultural Cabañas where I spend most of the afternoon in the galleries. By far the most impressive works are the series of murals by José Clemente Orozco in the main hall. The highlight is the *Man of Fire* on the domed ceiling in the center of the complex. I find this anonymous description of the mural on the Web:

“For all his disillusionment with the world, Orozco never lost his belief in the gifted individual’s capacity for freedom. No doubt *Man of Fire* is a kind of self-portrait—an artist moving upward, immolating himself in the artistic act, inspiration consuming itself as it burns. In the end, Orozco believed, beauty could be redemptive. “All aesthetics, of whatever kind, are a movement forward and not backward,” he said. “An art work is never negative. By the very fact of being an art work, it is constructive.”

Guadalajara, which has been called the Florence of Mexico, hasn't really grabbed me yet as I think it would if I were to stay longer. I know I would open my heart to the city: relax and not think I have to be on guard at all times. I haven't seen anything unnerving so far and the poor don't bother for handouts very much at all. They sit quietly behind stalls selling their wares, often with small children beside them. I'm used to seeing infants crawling on the sidewalk now, close to their mothers' stalls, dusty, beautiful bronze babies in colorful clothes.

My eyes aren't burning as they were on my first day here and the smell of car exhaust that struck me as soon as I entered the city doesn't seem so bad today, or maybe I'm just getting used to it. I think the smell of cars and the general dustiness of a city that doesn't see much rain are the two things I would have to adjust to if I were to live here. And, of course, the altitude.



Man of Fire, Orozco



**SMALL PILES
OF THOSE THINGS
THAT FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS IN THE FLOOR**

Instituto Cultural Cabañas

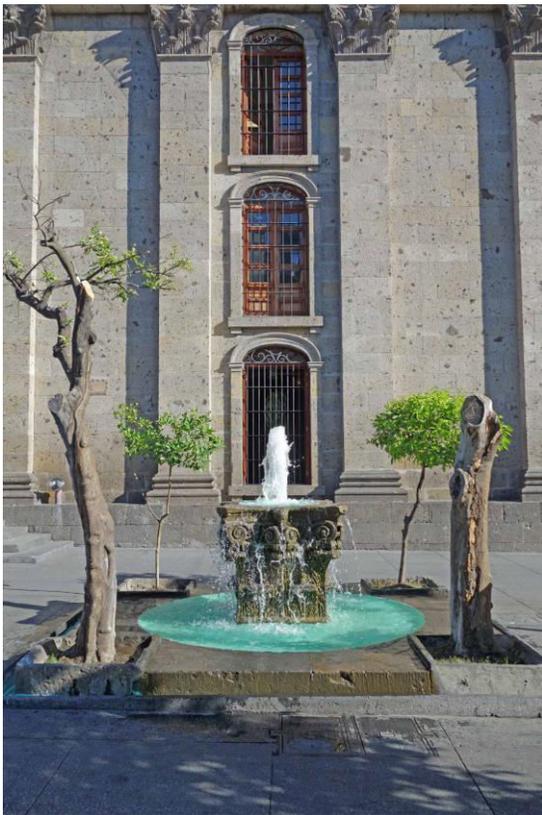
It's not for neglect that the city seems so dusty: you see people sweeping everywhere, all the time, and there are plenty of public wastebaskets with and hardly any little litter. I see few people smoking so there are no butts on the sidewalks and I guess they don't chew much gum either because there are almost none of the ugly black lumps of flattened gum that dot the sidewalks back home. I saw a woman empty a public wastebasket and actually wipe the exterior clean. And I saw a man take about five minutes to meticulously polish a gumball machine in a snack bar that looked clean enough to begin with.

In the evening I have an excellent dinner in an interesting little restaurant on an interesting street just around the corner from my hotel. Closed to traffic, the small side street is half restaurants with outdoor tables and half art school with young and old people working in front of easels on the cobbled road. There are stationery and art stores everywhere here. Is everyone an artist?

Waiting to leave for the bus station in the morning of Day 12, I watch a documentary in my hotel room about Israeli women who had served in the army in their youth. It's heartbreaking to hear about the things they saw and were required to do. They talk about the initial visceral excitement of adrenaline-pumped action and wielding power that I imagine most army recruits experience, but you can see the pain and regret on their faces – the memories and images they have to live with.

One woman tells of a Palestinian corpse with an erection and how the women soldiers all came to look and laugh and how she had her photo taken kneeling beside the recently deceased man. She looks puzzled and slightly horrified as she describes the scene and says she would really like to see the photo again, just to know if she is smiling in it. She can't imagine and can't remember.

Another woman describes an incident where Palestinian homes are being bombed and terrified residents are running amok. She hears a toddler crying and instinctively moves towards the baby to pick her up. The mother suddenly appears, picks up the infant and gives the invader a look of utter hatred that she clearly will remember for the rest of her life.



The bus station is huge and modern and I'm happy I paid an extra ten dollars for a seat on a luxury bus. I take a cab to my B&B in Guanajuato and get lucky with the light as I walk into the Historic Center where I take the funicular up to the statue of El Pipila and get some great shots of the city below in full sunlight with dark clouds on the horizon. In the evening I will feel another one of those rare moments of loneliness on the road. No one speaks English here, not even the family that owns the B&B. I was hoping there would be other guests to speak to, but I'm on my own.

I sleep well and have a great Mexican breakfast on Day 13, provided by my host Maggie in this huge, complicated house up in the hills which even the taxi drivers have trouble finding. And I buy my ticket home. This will be a short trip after all: two more days here will make it exactly two weeks. It was never meant to be a long trip, but it has been eventful and already has a certain symmetry (one week in California, one in Mexico) and an obvious narrative, with California representing life and American optimism, Mexico representing morbidity and death.

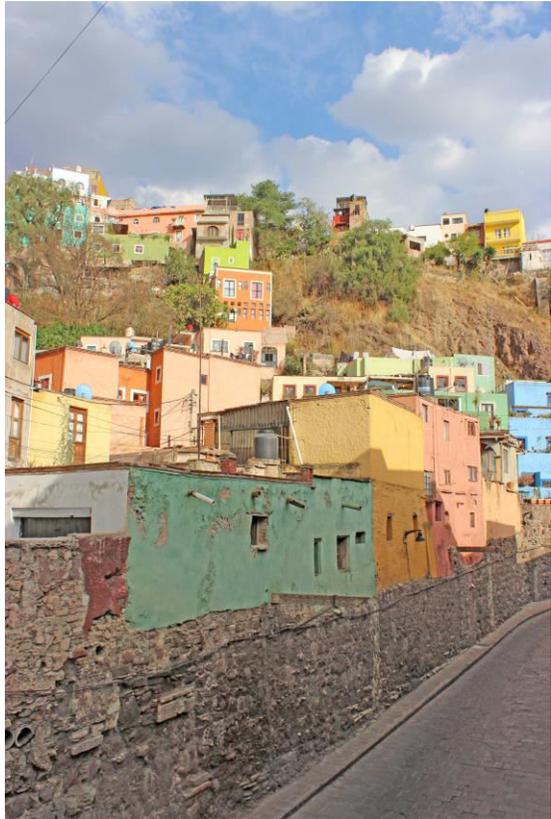
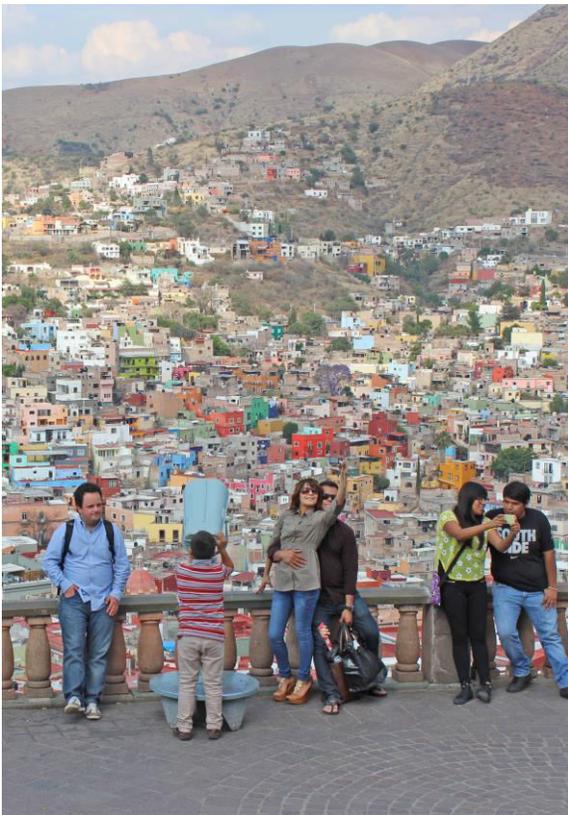
If I had to choose between the two at this very moment (and didn't have family in California) I think I would choose to live in Mexico. I find the disorder and preoccupation with death more interesting, spontaneous and upbeat than the poverty, racial and class segregation, ostentatious wealth, false optimism and car-confinement of California. Humans are meant to walk and mingle.

The Coffin book is not really a book, more a collection of excerpts and quotations of the reverend and progressive political activist. But the thoughts of a wise and holy man who was actually a member of the American upper class and the infamous *Skull and Bones Society* are very fine and I love his name. I'm already compiling my own much shorter list of "Coffin quotations".

Today is museum day and in the morning I visit the Diego Rivera House which is absolutely wonderful. What a fantastic artist. I will never tire of his murals and his (and Frida's) life story. The museum is situated in his childhood home and costs next to nothing to visit. I'm almost alone in the surprisingly large and beautiful building.







In the afternoon I walk to one of the strangest places on the planet: the Guanajuato Mummy Museum. The last fifteen minutes of the long trek requires a steep climb uphill and, forgetting to adjust my pace to the higher altitude, I'm completely out of breath and almost ready to become part of the gruesome display of accidentally mummified corpses by the time I get there.

No one is quite sure how the mummies, who were removed from their tombs for non-payment of cemetery fees between 1850 and 1958, were accidentally mummified. There are more than a hundred of them and some aren't very old at all. Cards indicate their names and occupations.

What we really see are partially decomposed corpses, which I always thought would be horrifying but in reality are almost invisible. The mummies are basically the color of dust and dirt and in a process of fading away into the background of life on this planet, just as all the animals that surround us, even the birds, squirrels and raccoons in our cities, seem to quickly disappear into the air or the earth when they die, because we rarely see their corpses. The only things I refrain from looking at in the museum are the mummified babies. There is no way to be objective about dead babies and I don't want memories of these images in my head.

It's the gaping-mouthed look of surprise and/or horror on the mummies' faces (an aftereffect of rigor mortis we are told) that I will remember more than anything else. A kind of eternal WTF-just-happened-to-me look.

The museum is transformative in other ways. I was never keen on cremation but after the visit my mind is definitely made up in favor of a quick postmortem return to dust and ashes. Not just because I don't want to end up in a mummy museum but also because there are indications that one of the poor souls, Ignacia Aguilar, was buried alive and woke up in a terrible panic. Let's make extra sure that doesn't happen. The biggest takeaway by far is that I don't think I will ever again be horrified by the notion of dead bodies. There is literally almost nothing there to be afraid of.



Before the day is over I've taken the funicular up the hill for the second day in a row and I find my Guanajuato fridge magnet. I love funiculars almost as much as hop-on-hop-off buses and feel like I've become a seasoned tourist. I take a nap on a bench at the top of the hill, then walk back down into the center of town for another fine and inexpensive Mexican dinner in an unpretentious restaurant.

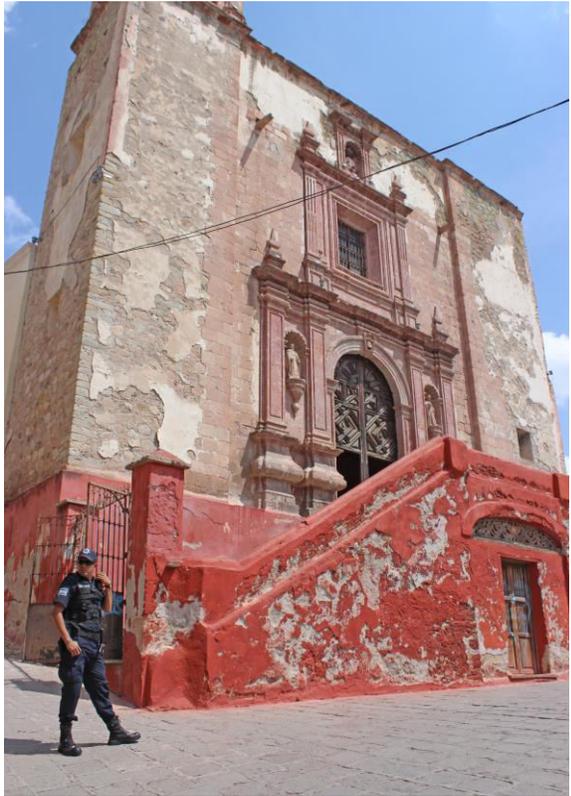
Day 14 is the last full day of the trip and I've got absolutely nothing planned, except to find a cross for the wall above my bed and one of the hand-painted ceramic skulls they sell everywhere here. It's supposed to be cloudy and wet but so far it's intermittently sunny and there's no sign of rain.

I'm pretty much beat, probably from all the walking uphill and the altitude. Initially, I think I might just sit down in various places reading and writing throughout the day, but I modify the plan and decide I'll visit every church I encounter. I'll linger in each, say a prayer, take some photos and collect Coffin quotations that seem relevant to this trip.

I walk into the center of town as slowly as possible. First church-stop is the Templo de San Francisco where my favorite saint, Francis, appears on the altar instead of Jesus or Mary. I approach a beautiful statue of Mary and, as I begin a prayer, the sun comes out and a ray of light enters through a window in the dome and shines directly onto the midsection of the statue, giving me a very nice photo. Coffin says that "when through despair or self-pity we become dead to rapture, friends are needed to remind us" that God made this world beautiful. I wish I had friends like this; I think I try to remind myself of this beauty with the photos I take.

Second church-stop is the Templo de San Diego de Alcala. Not for the first time, I will see ordinary people sitting in pews all of a sudden start singing, a special kind of prayer/meditation I haven't witnessed anywhere else. Coffin points out that the word enthusiasm means "in God" or "inspired by God". He says the scriptures say God is love, which means we can only know God through devotion, not through words or dogma.

It's noon and the sun is still making sporadic appearances. The small Historic Center is already familiar to me and I even have a favorite hangout: the Café Atrio. I linger in the café people-watching for an hour before I set off again in search of the next church.



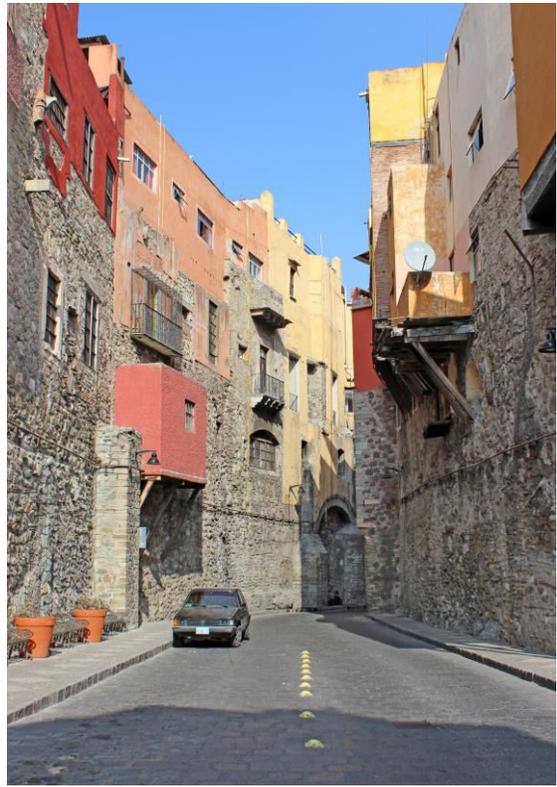
Third church-stop is the Basilica Colegiata de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato in the center of town, next to the Plaza de la Paz. Coffin says eternal life is not something we acquire after death; it's something accessible right now that we carry with us beyond death. He says that we are spirits with bodies, not the other way around.

Fourth and last church-stop is San Roque where there is one of the beautiful images of the Virgin of Guadalupe you see everywhere here. If I ever visit Mexico City again I will make it a point to visit her shrine, which is said to be the most visited Catholic site in the world. Coffin says that "the one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our life." I read somewhere else that if we don't truly contemplate death, we cannot live a full and meaningful life. We do everything we can to deny and ignore death in North America and yet we never feel more alive than when we look death in the eye. Symbols and images of death are everywhere here in Mexico where they seem to almost glorify the morbidity of this inevitable outcome.

Finally, late in the afternoon, I find a cross at the huge indoor Hidalgo Market. It's made of seven beautifully decorated ceramic tiles on a tin background and I know immediately that it will remain above my bed for the rest of my life. A few minutes later I find the small hand-painted black and white clay skull I will take home and it's already five o'clock and the trip is feeling like it's over.

It starts to rain heavily and I find myself sitting in a Starbucks on the main square, just like in Anaheim, with good WIFI and an over-priced hot chocolate, waiting for the rain to stop or at least let up a bit. This time tomorrow I'll be home. I like this city very much and I can imagine living here. The high desert climate is temperate and perfect and it never gets too hot or cold.

The rain shows no sign of stopping but, after an hour in Starbucks, it lets up a little and I make my escape. I pick up some takeout Chinese food and find a cab easily enough. I'll try to get to bed early because I will have to wake up at four for a seven o'clock flight.



I chose a good day to come home. It's seven degrees and crystal clear in Montreal and the plane does a full sweep, flying past the city then turning back for the landing. The city spread out below me is beautiful in the late afternoon light. I have my bag and I'm through customs in less than twenty minutes.

When I open my front door it's almost as if I've forgotten my home after fourteen days of intense travel. It feels different from past homecomings - a little bit like rediscovering someone I used to know. And as I walk around my home inspecting all my belongings, especially the many photos and the two bulletin boards crammed with images and souvenirs, I realize that the person who lives here is telling stories in his own way, and this is a good thing.

I feel my mind already starting to slip back into familiar grooves and recall Yogananda in his autobiography talking about re-grooving, about creating new patterns of thinking, something we need to be doing at all times, especially in old age. Coffin says that "a mind once stretched by a new idea can never return to its former shape." A beautiful and comforting metaphor.

I find the *Winged Seeds* image on the bulletin board in my bedroom and read the Thomas Merton inscription I had placed at the bottom:

Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.

I imagine my organic body as a receptacle of these winged seeds, much like the decomposing dirt-like shells of human corpses in the Mummy Museum, and imagine what I can do, how I can live to make myself more receptive to the seeds I pick up on my travels, and more fertile to their development. I imagine that if I lead a spiritually fertile life, the life that springs from the seeds will outlive my body and maybe in this way I can continue some kind of life within *them*, as they once lived within me.

Or let me burn like the *Man of Fire* – let these seeds take root and come alive inside me and when it's time to burn I'll take the whole lot of them with me.

I open a bottle of wine, light some incense and prepare to begin the delicious ritual of unpacking, which I always do immediately. One by one, I discover the treasures I picked up along the way, some completely forgotten: the shiny red bottle opener given to me by the cheerful young store clerk in Lynnwood; the dusty piece of obsidian from Obsidian Butte; the fridge magnets - only three this time - from the Salton Sea, Guadalajara and Guanajuato. And, of course, the cross and the skull.

I walk to my very own corner market, where the people are so nice and friendly and familiar, and I bask in the warmth and comfort of the knowledge that I have a small home and a little corner of the world I call my own. And I'm alive! I'm not a mummy! Each and every day I should thank God I'm alive. And relatively healthy. And free – don't forget the miracle of freedom which is the hardest thing of all to remember.

Merton says that seeds require freedom, spontaneity and love to spring into life. I think I understand the freedom and love parts, but what does he mean by spontaneity? I ask the Web. Merton uses the word often and seems to mean living in awe, or at least awareness, of how unique each moment is, and being open to the infinite possibilities that exist in each of these moments.

In this moment I choose to clear a space in the center of the upper panel of my refrigerator for the magnetized souvenirs of my latest pilgrimage. Good trip, thank God.

