

PRE-AMBLE



Hitting the road armed only with my thumb, a rucksack, and a piece of cardboard has always been an important part of my life. Especially when I'm ready – or, more usually, desperate – to close one chapter and open another. I even did a six-week-long hitch around Britain in 2008 – a journey which kept on coming back to haunt me during this one, because that journey didn't really close the chapter I was trying to run away from, and it seems I left parts of my soul scattered along the way.

My dad was a hitch-hiker during his teacher training days, travelling between Stoke and Durham in all seasons, and between Stoke and Dewsbury whilst he was courting mum. I can remember a few of his hitching tales: the lift in a Rolls Royce; the lift with an women's underwear salesman from Wigan; three hours spent in pitch darkness in the back of a slowly-trundling lorry; and even the time when two tired business men picked him up, installed him in the driving seat, and then promptly fell asleep. Mum only ever attempted hitching once – with her college friend Mary – but they got hassled by a van of lads in the middle of Norfolk and had to run out into the road to stop a bewildered elderly couple, who kindly took them in. But mum told the story with such a lightness of touch that I never registered how scary that must have been. And every now and then, during my Lincolnshire childhood, dad would pick up a hitching squaddie – one of whom had the smelliest feet ever – so I guess hitching always in my blood and in my imagination. Ha – I've never thought of it like this: perhaps hitching was one of my dad's gifts to me.

The first time I ever had a go myself, I was only thirteen years old and on a school cross-country run. Not only was it one of the most exciting and rebellious things I had ever done – I was generally quite a goodie goodie – I also achieved the only athletic victory of my entire school anti-athletic career. But my hitching vocation proper didn't begin until 1984, shortly after my eighteenth birthday, when I hitched from London to Coventry for a CND demo. I didn't have a clue what I was doing – a lorry dropped me off on the hard shoulder of the M6 and some passing motorway cops gave me a minor bollocking and sent me yomping across a field – but somehow I got there and back, and soon I was hitching up and down the land like a seasoned hobo. Hitching was as common as peace camp muck back then – sometimes I'd

make my way from Brent Cross tube to the beginning of the M1 and there'd some times already be a dozen hitchers, spread out along the hard shoulder, all competing for the next lift. Hitching down to Glastonbury in June was festive madness, every service station a mini-festival in its own right. I remember getting dropped off at one particular roundabout, and there were already twenty other hitchers there. A VW kombi pulled over, my friend got in, a couple of others pushed in front of me, and then the doors were slid shut – and that was the last I saw of both her (and my tent) for two days.

According to back-of-an-unbranded-fag-packet calculations, I must have hitched a good five thousand rides, maybe a couple of thousand more – and not just around the British Isles, but also around Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany, Canada, the States, and South Africa's Western Cape. For the first twenty years of my adult life hitching was my main form of transport. But in my forties I started using the train a lot more, especially during the winter months, and then, six years ago, looking after my mum back up in Lincolnshire, it was finally time to take the plunge and get my driving test – nominally so that I could ferry mum around, but also because it was time for me to grow up and get in the driving seat. But, oh, how convenient car ownership quickly becomes...

Driving around nowadays I hardly ever see any hitchers – maybe one, occasionally two, a year. Of course, I always pick them up. My karmic hitch-hiking account is pressed down, shaken up and overflowing, and I'm always delighted to pay back the hitching deities for their generosity. But, for sure, hitch-hiking looks like a fairly dormant form of transport in this particular stretch of twenty-first century Britain.

As for being a pilgrim, I've only ever taken part in one pilgrimage, and that was just for the tail end, and it wasn't your usual sort of pilgrimage either. It was during Easter Week, 1984, the same week I turned eighteen. I was a really earnest and quite evangelical Christian at the time, living and working in a Church of England Children's Home, in my year between school and university. For a good year or more, I'd been praying and reading about pacifism. Was Jesus a pacifist? Did the bible teach pacifism? Was God a pacifist even? I dragged my theological and spiritual heels a bit, but once I decided yes, then I knew I had to do something about it. So, I booked a few days off work, and on Easter Saturday morning caught the train to Cambridge, found the Quaker Meeting House, and joined the final few days of an Easter Peace Pilgrimage – around some of Britain's numerous nuclear bases. My fellow pilgrims were a motley crew – Quaker anarchists, Catholic feminists, Lutheran trumpeters, Methodist clowns – and they welcomed me in with open arms. I had my first taste of what Martin Luther King calls the *beloved community*. I was never the same again. And even though I later lost my Christian faith, I've always considered that pilgrim experience as one of the pivotal times of my life. And I've always known that I have quite a pilgrim soul. But maybe we all do.

As I describe in my pre-pilgrimage journal below, this particular hitch-hiking pilgrimage was a few years in the brewing. Or, rather, I was a few years in the brewing. There's no point in hitching and wild camping when you're feeling raw and vulnerable. And the last few years have seen me feeling very raw and very vulnerable.



Thursday, 1st March

Quite a few years ago I came across an article by Satish Kumar in which he described a pilgrimage he undertook in 1986 around some of Britain's sacred places – including Iona, Lindisfarne and

Glastonbury – to mark his fiftieth birthday. Satish is no stranger to pilgrimage: in the early 1960s, whilst still a Jain monk, he and a friend walked from India to four of the five capitals of the nuclear club – Moscow, Paris, London, Washington – in order to deliver messages of peace. Apparently, it's a well-established tradition in India for men at least to undertake a pilgrimage at the age of fifty, and I made a mental note to consider such a venture when I reached my first half-century.

But when I hit fifty I was in a very raw emotional state, and if I'd set sail under such internal conditions I reckon I would have got washed up on the rocks of Watford Gap before I'd barely left harbour. When I reached my fifty-first birthday last year I wasn't much sturdier, although I did manage a higgledy piggledy hitch from Oxford to Iona, and discovered that strangers are still kind to strangers – a lorry driver even gave me a bottle of whisky as a parting gift, having ferried me all the way from Tyndrum to Tobermory.

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Truth be told, my mum's death – over four years ago now – hit me really hard. Grief cross-faded into depression, but it took me ages to realise that I was depressed – I just thought I was crap at grieving and crap at life in general. And then from below the depression arose chronic anxiety, and from within that anxiety arose old unresolved childhood trauma. I've spent a lot of these last four years lost in a very dark and tangled wood. There have even been a couple of times when I've ventured into suicidal thoughts and fantasies, which is disturbing terrain indeed.

There have also been several times too when I've over-optimistically declared that I've finally made it through to the other side, only to be pulled back in by furious sylvan forces. I tend to be a lot more cautious nowadays about my use of metaphor. So, I might not be out of the forest of self-disintegration, but I'm beginning to enjoy more and more sunshine reaching through the branches of its trees. And that sunshine is worth its weight in gold...

Something inside me is increasingly hungry for this pilgrim adventure. It feels like the right time.

Of course, any proper pilgrimage involves both an outer and an inner adventure, and whilst I can plan for the outer journey, there's no way I can predict my inner journey. But I will carry two prayers with me: one for the restoration of my soul, and the other for the healing of my heart.

Grief, depression, anxiety, trauma and post-traumatic stress all affect the human soul profoundly, and often seem to send it into exile. They also all affect the human heart. When I looked after my dying mum, my heart was wide, wide open – perhaps too wide – but a couple of weeks after she died it simply shut down. I felt the process happen. It took all of a minute – it was even quite methodical, as if there were several doors to be shut in a particular order. And my heart has rarely opened ever since.

A couple of months ago I was reading a poem by Mary Oliver and came across the following lines:

Every morning I walk around
the pond, thinking: if the doors of my heart
ever close, I am as good as dead.

I put the book down, and felt like I'd been punched... I wanted to say to her, *You wouldn't actually die!* And then I thought: *But there will often be a thick pane of glass between you and the pond, between you and the breeze, between you and life itself... And you won't write much poetry. And you'll forget what joy feels like. And...*

And then I re-read her lines and realised *that* is precisely what she is referring to. Perhaps it's even her deepest fear. And I had to admit to myself: living with a closed heart and a distant soul often feels like living in some sort of limbo zombie zone.

In order to coax myself back to life, I'm having to ditch a whole host of old habits and learn a raft of new ones – including how to be patient and compassionate towards myself, without being too soft, and how to be honest and vulnerable with others, especially when I'm going through a particularly rough patch. And I'm also having to learn to deal with a very sensitive nervous system, which can go into high alert on the basis of flimsy evidence – including dreams – and sometimes even flips like an over-sensitive trip switch.

At the same time, I can't hide behind my pathologies. A few weeks ago, over spliffs and a bottle of good whisky, I asked a good friend to tell me what he saw. He paused thoughtfully, and then replied that he thought I'd been unconsciously maintaining my suffering, using my energy and power to stay stuck. He said it was really painful to watch, and that he felt quite helpless. His honest – and profoundly loving – feedback hit me like a blast of truth. And in the days to follow, as I reflected on this revelation, I saw that one of the ways I think I've prolonged my pain and suffering is in waiting for my heart and soul to return before I recommit myself to life and living.

But I suspect many of us are like that – waiting for the right conditions before we commit one hundred per cent to this life we've been given, warts and all. Sure, when life is going well it's easy to feel open-hearted and generous and even in love with Life itself. But what happens when things aren't going well, or are even going really badly? Whether blatantly or subtly, I've spent way too much of my life holding out for a better version of myself, for my emotional life to improve, for God to show me some of the goodies, for the present moment to feel sexier or more complete, before I properly commit to Life.

"The soul," writes Robert Bly, "does nothing if you do nothing; but if you light a fire, it chops wood; if you make a boat, it becomes the ocean."

And if I stand by the roadside and stick out my thumb?

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Originally this was going to be a pilgrimage around just sacred sites and holy places. But when I ran the idea past my good friend Arch, he took one look at me and said, "And pubs." There was no arguing with the man. A hitch-hiking pilgrimage around sacred places and public houses of Britain. In search of my soul, and in search of an open heart...

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Friday, 9th March

I've been thinking quite a bit about commitment. It's not my strongest subject... If I am going to recommit myself to Life, what particular commitments am I going to make?

As soon as I asked that question of myself a few days ago things began to get a bit unnerving. It was as if a spotlight suddenly turned on me, and I've been existentially squirming ever since. As if a higher part of me has responded, "Now we're talking."

Fuck.

Because if I know that if I let that higher part of me do the talking, I've definitely going to have to go up a gear or two in my life.

Here goes. Let's see what he has to say:

- I commit to taking full responsibility for my experience of life.
- I commit to being as present as I can be, moment to moment.
- I commit to fully trusting the Mystery of Life, whatever the ups and downs.
- I commit to being honest.
- I commit to growing up, and putting in the effort required.
- I commit to getting back up whenever I fall down.
- I commit to enjoying the ride in all its fullness.

Fuck. That's not first or second gear stuff.

My higher self has now gone and locked me out of editing these commitments.

Fuck.

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Of course, if I'm going to make these daylight commitments, I've first got to face their nocturnal shadows:

- I don't want to take full responsibility for my life. Eighty per cent, tops.
- I'm often elsewhere, usually mulling over the past or responding to some imagined future. I don't believe this moment is sufficient, or deserving of my full attention.
- I don't trust Life. Or anyone else for that matter. I am fundamentally on my own.
- I do want to develop and grow, but without having to put in consistent effort. Actually, there's quite a strong part of me that doesn't even want to grow up.
- I often put presentation ahead of true honesty. Often I tell the partial truth. Sometimes I even lie.
- I collapse very easily. I can stay down for ages. I've got out of the habit of taking healthy risks. Sometimes I don't even bother getting up in the first place.

- I don't live life to the full. I'm ambivalent about both enjoyment and pleasure. And I'm often very ambivalent about just being alive, especially in the light of the last few years' darkness. Yes, no, maybe. No wonder Life doesn't quite know what to make of my mixed messages.

Fuck...

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Wednesday 18th April

Yesterday was my fifty-second birthday. Finally: a full pack of cards. Which means I can no longer complain about the hand I've been dealt. Even though I can present quite an upbeat character, behind closed doors I can be a bit of a whiner. Am I being fair on myself saying that? Put it another way: I often find that commitment to take *full* responsibility for my experience of life very challenging. Recently came across a sweet piece employing the playing cards metaphor:

No matter what – if we don't accept every card in our hand, we can't play our best game. We'll be compromised by guilt, resentment, or self-hatred.

The deep game is not about being dealt a better hand, but about playing the cards we're dealt with as much intelligence, care, and creativity as we possibly can.

The first step is to forgive the cards in your hands. Open your heart to the quirky, noble, tragic, comic human idiosyncrasies of the character that shows up as you. Be willing to live the life you were given. As that acceptance takes root, you can wholeheartedly and authentically engage the unique – and perfect – opportunity of your birth.

Ken Wilber, Terry Patten, Adam Leonard, Marco Morelli
Integral Life Practice

...I've decided to put the pilgrimage back by a couple of weeks. Was beginning to stress about being ready in time for May Day. I am essentially a tortoise. I don't want to be hurried, I need to get fitter, I need to get back on the horse of my daily spiritual practice, and I quite fancy a preparatory retreat somewhere or other.

I'm having second thoughts about taking both a tent and a bivvy bag. Every quarter kilo is going to count on this journey, and my back isn't the strongest in the world. But it would be nice to have the option of sleeping tent-less and not getting too soggy from any midnight drizzle or cusp-of-dawn dew. Packing dilemmas, packing dilemmas...

Alas, packing light has never been my strong point. But I am very good at packing slowly. I swung by Ruth and Theo's in deepest Dorset and made a copper hare – called Mellangel – to

take with me on my journey; I bought a fold-up keyboard that I could Bluetooth to my phone, so that I could type along the way (this digital sophistication lasted all of two weeks); I bought notebooks and socks and a first aid kit and other such sundries; I dug out my faithful tent and gave it a trial run up on the Ridgeway; I scribbled pub names and sacred sites on my Map of Possibilities; I packed, unpacked, and re-packed several times. I also put out an invitation for friends to sponsor my beer and hommous fund, and was blown away by the response.

Every now and then, though, I found myself wondering what on earth I was doing. Was I really in a fit state for this kind of mid-life malarkey? Would this really put me back in touch with my soul? Would this really re-connect a broken me to the wonder and glory of Life? And yet, every now and then I also glimpsed, from somewhere deep within my bones, that I was in for a proper adventure.

A few days before departure I threw a little farewell garden party at Liz's in Florence Park. So many friends my age – both men and women – once were hitchers, and, like old soldiers reminiscing about battles once waged, many hitching stories were shared. They weren't all buoyant stories either: one friend's friend was murdered whilst hitching; another friend once had a shotgun pulled on him. I was reminded that hitching is a fundamentally vulnerable way of travelling, which ain't a bad thing to remember, although it's worth not dwelling on it too much. In all my hitching years I've only had three lifts I'd consider properly dodgy, and I somehow handled them all well enough. Annie gave me a plastic tortoise to accompany Mellangel the hare, and I named him Cuthbert. Every hare needs a tortoise, and vice versa – they are the yin and yang of travelling. Glasses were raised and toasts were toasted. It felt good to invite – and to receive – the blessings of the tribe.

Eventually, I was ready to roll. I said goodbye to my Oxford friends, drove down to Kent to leave my car with my brother, and had one last, luxuriously bourgeois bath...

