

TAKE THE WHEEL, KID

A travel-loving parent writes a letter to her daughter about the rules of the road

By Clayton Maxwell

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Dear Carlisle,

Now that you are 13 and taller than I am, there are a few things I'm compelled to tell you before you someday take off on one of the greatest thrills of your growing freedom—the road trip. As a Texan, it is your birthright. With 858 miles to cover, from Orange to El Paso, and varied terrain from the Gulf Coast Prairies to the High Plains, this state is built for traversing. I can already see you: belting out tunes to the car radio as you wind through East Texas' Piney Woods, rolling down your windows to smell the salty air while crossing the causeway to Padre Island, and pulling over to sink your teeth into fresh-picked peaches at a farm stand in the Hill Country.

As your mom, the one who still makes you breakfast every morning, it's only fair that you should listen to a little of my wisdom gained from the road. The most important

thing to realize is that a good traveler can turn an unexpected detour into its own sweet destination and convert the bumps along the way into great stories to tell. But here are seven more travel tips to ensure you are—to borrow from the Roger Miller song—king, or queen, of your own road.

1. SELF-RELIANCE IS THE FIRST VIRTUE OF THE ROAD

Carlisle, have you heard of wanderlust? If it's genetic, chances are you have it, and I hope you do. I still do. After college graduation, I hightailed it out to the dusty Texas border town of Presidio to work for a hard-to-please adobe enthusiast I'll call Estelle, who had a vision to bring adobe housing to the people. I quickly disappointed her; she fired me, and I was stuck in Presidio without a plan. But I did befriend a brainy East Coast boy named Jon—another one of Estelle's flunkies. Not wanting to leave, he managed to finagle a job for himself as Presidio High's first college counselor. Jon, my new comrade in derailed plans, let me stay in the spare room of his casita until I figured out my next move.

Aimless and happy, I spent many cool desert mornings on Jon's front porch, drinking coffee, reading, and watching the golden West Texas light move across his dirt yard. At sunset, when Jon returned from work, we would sometimes sit in the shallow waters of the Rio Grande, where we could hear the *norteño* music and barking dogs across the river in Mexico.

We also listened to Walt Whitman. It was 1993—we didn't own iPhones or even computers—but Jon had a record player and five records. One was a gravelly baritone reading of Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road." We played that old scratchy thing over and over until I committed the words to memory. "Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road ... Henceforth I ask not good fortune. I myself am good fortune..."

Sunburnt and broke that winter, I crisscrossed the Trans-Pecos, from Marathon to Terlingua, in my dented 1984 Volvo sedan, adopting that great traveler's poem as my manifesto. Did I care that I had to survive on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on stale bread? Nope. Could I make the most of any circumstance? Bring it on!

"O public road," Whitman wrote, "You express me better than I express myself." Out on those Texas roads, I felt very much myself. While my confidence and optimism have at times been challenged since—you know, knee injuries, mortgages, middle age—I still believe the best thing you take on any adventure is an ease with yourself, a kind of inner-unflappability. You—a strong, able girl who can tack up a horse in a flash—you are your own good fortune.

2. PUT DOWN THE PHONE AND EMBRACE THE PAPER MAP

The words “travel” and “travail” are similar for a reason. Back in the Middle Ages, when the word was coined, travel was a difficult pursuit—a travail—and danger and discomfort on the road were guaranteed. Nowadays, travel is comparatively cushy—GPS, Bluetooth, cruise control. And yet there are still travails and things you must pay attention to. Like the gas gauge. Texas is big, and there are some long stretches of highway where you can’t count on a gas station popping up when you need it.

For reasons I no longer understand, my college friends and I, when driving down to the border from Austin, or, say, up to Dallas for the 1989 Rolling Stones tour, would wait to see how close we could get to empty before filling up. It was as if there was some virtue in using as much gas as possible before refilling, like paying for

your coffee with exact change. However, driving on fumes means you risk humiliation or worse when you have to thumb a ride from a police officer, or perhaps a stranger, to buy and fill up a 5-gallon jug with gas at the nearest station, and then ride 20 or more miles back to your abandoned car.

Also, one crucial road-tripping tip that no one had to worry about in the Middle Ages: Put down your phone and drive. That is an order. No reading your Instagram messages while behind the wheel. If you do and you wreck, I’ll know about it, and you will never drive again. The only dependable thing to read while pulled over is a map. A paper map, like from the old days. Because, I’m sorry to say, Siri is not as reliable as she may seem, and there will come a time when you are in the middle of nowhere—Texas has a lot of nowhere—and there’s no cell phone coverage to power Google Maps.

3. KNOW WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

Sometimes you will overestimate your Whitman-esque invincibility. It’s OK to ask for help. Back when I was figuring out my plan in Presidio, I also befriended some young architects who worked in Marfa at the Chinati Foundation. One Friday afternoon, I made a spur-of-the-moment decision to ride my old mountain bike from their little barrack studio in Marfa all the way down US 67 back south to Presidio. Never mind that I’d never ridden long distance before. It was just 60 miles and mostly downhill, so how hard could it be? I sang the song of the open road!

But there were key details about that stretch of road I hadn’t noticed before because I’d always been in a car. Like that the first part of US 67 to Presidio actually ascends before it cruises down to the Rio Grande. And that the wind can blow strong from the south, so you feel like you’re pedaling into a wall. I also hadn’t

considered that on a Friday, folks would be driving up from Mexico for the weekend, and that means pickup trucks flying past, making me wobble in their wake. There was one moment I recall as vividly as West Texas light after a rainstorm: I stopped for water, straddled my bike, and stared at the jagged branches of the ocotillo by the highway. I thought, “You’re just going to have to make friends with this road because you’re going to be on it for a long, long time.”

By the time I got to Shafter, the tiny silver-mining ghost town 20 miles north of the finish line, I wasn’t invincible anymore. The once endless sky was darkening, and the wind grew fierce. Fortunately, the now long-shuttered general store in Shafter was open and had a pay phone. I had a quarter. Chagrined, I called Rod, a West Texas lawyer I’d met. Kind and reliable, he picked me up in his truck so I didn’t have to ride the rest of the way in the dark.

In his own version of the golden rule, Whitman writes, “You have done such good to me I would do the same to you.” Make friends who will show up for you in a pinch and be that kind of friend in return.

4. LEAVE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND

In the mid-’90s, my friend Kirsten and I were driving her Jeep from Austin to New Orleans for graduate school. We filled up at about 10 p.m. in Winnie, just off I-10. A few miles outside of town, the Jeep sputtered, coughed, and died. With no cell phone yet, it was just us, alone on the road in the dark, cicada song filling the humid night air. Two guys in a pickup pulled over. We hoped they’d stopped to help, but we couldn’t be sure. These fellows wore work overalls and trucker hats and spit tobacco and determined that, by the smell of the diesel fumes, we’d put the wrong fuel in our tank.

We then spent a long, awkward, but strangely poignant few hours siphoning the diesel out of the Jeep’s tank by sucking on a plastic tube these guys pulled out of their truck. With just a sliver of a moon

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overhead on a sticky East Texas night, using a flashlight from their truck, the four of us took turns siphoning. The guys played AC/DC from their truck. We shared Fritos and the last two | continued on Page 102

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Lone Stars they had in their cooler. It actually felt pretty good, like we were all in this together—and we were.

Leave your assumptions about people and places behind—we don't know as much about others as we think we do. In "Song of the Open Road," Whitman embraces the highway and everyone on it. "I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, and whoever beholds me shall like me." People will often surprise you with their kindness.

(But you, Carlisle, have a cell phone, so if you ever end up on the side of the road in the dark, please call Dad and me.)

5. PICK YOUR SOUNDTRACK WELL

Remember two summers ago singing "You're So Vain" full tilt with me when driving out to visit Aunt Martha in Galveston? Music is better on a road trip. You can croon out loud, and your off-notes are disguised by the hum of the car. And because you have nothing else to do but drive and listen with the landscape zooming past, the music seeps into your bones. Although, and no offense, maybe not so much with your favorites musicians—Drake, Cardi B, Khalid. I'm talking about real road trip songs like David Byrne's "Road to Nowhere" or Joni Mitchell's "Coyote," or the entirety of Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman* album.

Many of the best singer-songwriter poets to amplify a road trip with their songs are fellow Texans. "Me and Bobby Magee"—penned by one Texan, Kris Kristofferson, and made legendary by another, Janis Joplin—takes on new meaning when you're belting it out on the highway. Blaze Foley's "Clay Pigeons" hints at both the melancholy and redemption of life on the road, but he's traveling in a Greyhound bus, something I've done plenty and you should try too someday. Guy Clark's "Dublin Blues" conjures all the loneliness that can hit you when you're traveling, when you miss someone and maybe you crave a visit to a familiar haunt, like Austin's Texas Chili Parlor.

And then there's Willie. My old Volvo had this thing called a cassette player. It would play the same tape over and over

until you made it stop. On one road trip to Port Arthur, with only a handful of cassettes, my friends and I listened to Cassette 1 of the double LP *Willie and Family Live* for the entire 249 miles. It's a real hum-dinger that kicks off with "Whiskey River," peaks into the Willie and Waylon Jennings duet "Good Hearted Woman," and melts into "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain." Every time it cycled back to that opening line, "Whiskey River take my mind," it was as energizing as mile one.

6. KNOW WHEN TO TAKE THE RIDE

A couple of years ago just before Christmas, my friend Brooke's mother, Mary Lou, who lived in Fort Davis, was admitted to the hospital. Brooke, who hadn't seen her mother in a few years, had a wonky car at the time so I offered to drive her out from Austin to see her mom. Your Christmas presents weren't yet wrapped, but getting my friend to her mom was more important. And then, the night before our departure, Brooke got the call that Mary Lou had suddenly passed, and the trip we thought was going to be a visit abruptly turned into a farewell.

Those six-plus hours on the road, driving west at 80 miles an hour, were a bittersweet rite of passage. Neither of us had ever lost a parent; we were not prepared.

The next day, we walked out of clear December sunlight into the stucco doorway of the Alpine Memorial Funeral Parlor, bracing ourselves to say goodbye. The funeral director, a large football player of a guy named Joe, was formal but kind and told us he had not embalmed Mary Lou, as Brooke had requested, but had applied "just a little natural makeup so she would look pretty." He also told us, just as we were about to walk into the visitation room, that he had not put on music. "I know that you guys are from Austin," he said, "so you'd probably want something cool, like Led Zeppelin."

It was hard to suppress the laughter. We told him it was OK, we didn't need Led Zeppelin. Silence was fine. That moment—Joe's odd but sweet aside—crystallized the absurd beauty of this whole wild world. Whether he intended to or not, Joe brought

just the right zing of humor into the moment so we could laugh and exhale.

So, Carlisle, when given the chance, and if it's with the right person, a road trip can give you the best gift there is—a deepened friendship.

7. PAUSE, KEEP A JOURNAL

At the end of his essay "Why We Travel" Pico Iyer writes, "And if travel is like love, it is, in the end, mostly because it's a heightened state of awareness, in which we are mindful, receptive, undimmed by familiarity and ready to be transformed. That is why the best trips, like the best love affairs, never really end." A break from familiarity and routine, road trips sharpen your awareness enough that you arrive home better knowing who you are. So wherever you go, make sure you give yourself space: Pull over, lean back against the car, and breathe in the air. Out under the endless Texas sky, the world is big. Feel yourself in it.

And write it down. Remember that drive home from our South Padre surf trip when we were still giddy from catching our first waves, and the sky outside Lockhart was otherworldly with huge gray clouds backlit by a strange golden glow? You'll have experiences so good you'll want them to last forever. They won't, but writing them down memorializes them.

The road is thrilling but less so if it's all you've got. For me, the very best thing about a road trip is coming home—to you, your brother, your dad. Whitman ends "Song of the Open Road" with an invitation: "Camerado, I give you my hand! ... will you come travel with me? Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?" That Whitman's expansive poem about life on the road should conclude with a simple request for companionship is a message to all travelers: We need each other.

Wanderlust, if it runs deep, never leaves you. So yes, I will come travel with you. When the time is right. But first, you have to take off on your own. Before that, though, you need to learn how to drive.

Love,
Mom 