

Leaving California

A state or a state-of-mind?

I crossed the California state line heading east on Interstate 10 at 2:03 p.m. on Friday, May 23, 2014.

I had left the state I never thought I'd leave. I never thought I'd leave because I'd been there since 1966—a mere forty-eight years.

Obviously, inertia alone favored my staying.

As did history. My mother's entire family was in California. My dad's was in South Carolina. That's why I grew up in Denver. Sort of splitting the difference. So one summer we'd drive out on vacation to visit my South Carolina relatives, next summer we'd drive out to visit the ones in California. I went to Disneyland not too long after it opened. And Knott's Berry Farm just up the road. I went to San Francisco Seals baseball games in Kezar Stadium with my grandfather. My mother worked in San Francisco and lived on Bush Street when she met my father, who was fresh out of WWII and stationed with the Navy at Treasure Island. I spent a couple of years going to UCLA, but then transferred to Berkeley, where I earned my degree in philosophy. Then I studied film at San Francisco State. And attended the Graduate Management College at Stanford. My entire advertising career was spent in San Francisco. Everything I was, everyone I knew, every experience I'd had as an adult was in California.

Yet I left.

It was easier than I thought it would be. In fact, the hardest part was leaving our daughters, one of whom lives with her fiancé in San Francisco and the other in Los Angeles.

The other deterrent was fear. Not fraidy-cat fear like not wanting to jump off the high board or touching both terminals of a nine-volt battery at the same time, but fear of the unknown, cutting every tether and letting yourself drift on the fickle breeze of fate. You forget how dependent you become on the infrastructure you've build around yourself over the years—friends, doctors, where to shop, where to get your car fixed or your hair cut, who to call in an emergency, which movie theater had the best seats, the best sound system, the best popcorn, how to get around, where to take out-of-town guests to show off your community (which was especially easy in the Bay Area, with San Francisco, Sausalito, Stinson Beach, Muir Woods, the Marin Headlands, Wine Country, and even Lake Tahoe and Yosemite all easy gasp-inducing drives away).

So why leave?

Because it was time.

Ronald Reagan famously said that he didn't leave the Democrat Party, the Democrat Party left him. I don't know that California left me, exactly, but I do know that the California I knew when I was a kid visiting in the 50s, going to school in the 60s and 70s, and working in the 80s and 90s was not the same California that I left two months ago.

Maybe California became a victim of its own California-ness. The state has always had a schizophrenic personality. LA and SF always have always had a certain urban tension, as much a function of cramming a few million people into a small space and expecting them to get along as it is of an aspiration to be an edgy amalgam of New York, Boston, and Chicago reconstituted with West-Coast Cool.

Yet other than these two great centers of cultural, social, and intellectual uniqueness (I mean, Stanford and Berkeley are less than forty miles apart, UCLA and USC just over ten, Apple is one freeway over from Google, Intel, HP, they're all right in the neighborhood, just like Disney is in Burbank just across the 101 from Warner Brothers, which is just across the LA River from Universal, which is just over the hill on the Hollywood freeway from Paramount.

The genius that has changed our world is nowhere more concentrated than in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Los Angeles area.

Yet the rest of the state—the parts that *aren't* San Francisco and Los Angeles—might as well be on another planet. The Central Valley is the breadbasket of America. Geographically the floor of an ancient inland sea that flowed to the Pacific through Monterey Bay (which was not in Monterey at the time, but actually down near Santa Barbara—got to love that San Andreas Fault!), the Central Valley is to agriculture what Hollywood is to movies and television: It's where it happens.

And forming the Central Valley's eastern boundary are the Sierra Nevada, a remarkable range of tectonic uplift, volcanic building, and glacial etching that has given us the highest peak in the continental United States with Mt. Whitney in the south, Lake Tahoe in the middle, and Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta to the north as part of the same potentially devastating chain as Mt. Saint Helens, Mt. Hood, and Mt. Rainier.

These massive forces of nature that shaped California seem also to have shaped the personalities of the people who live there. When gold was discovered in 1848 at Sutter's Mill near Sacramento, it promulgated one of the largest migrations of human beings in history, flooding California with people from all across the country, from Canada, and from around the world. Before then, of course, before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican American War, California was part of Mexico, as were all of Nevada and Utah, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. And the Gold Rush of 1848 only drew more people from Mexico, Central America and South America.

So California has always been on the frontier of heterogeneity, with the ocean on one side and mountains on the other, with redwood forests in the north and desert in the south, with the highest place in Mt. Whitney and the lowest place in Death Valley, with 10% of the U.S. population but 30% of the welfare, with invisible poor and ostentatious rich, home to the Summer of Love and Charles Manson. Dramatic conflict raised to an art form, endemic in the place and in the people, not being part of history but making history itself, leaving today behind to create the future tomorrow.

If it's happening, it probably happened in California first. Open-land trusts, ridge-line building restrictions, no-growth initiatives, air-quality standards, emission controls, green-building initiatives, technological breakthroughs that changed the world of electronics, medicine, finance, entertainment, transportation, clothing, and even the grind of daily living.

Yet these very achievements have led, over the decades, to a certain sclerosis, maybe more a paralysis, as if the expectation of being "California" were so high that success grew into a parody of itself. Google was a brilliant concept that was built into a fabulous business that became so successful that it became the "star" of a movie with Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson. The executive chef, the free food, the geek-chic, the nap pods, all of a sudden all the stuff that made Google unique and creative and fun now made it more like an updated, hipper version of Woody Allen's *Sleepers*, notwithstanding, I assume, the Orgasmatron. And then, in the end, when Sergey Brin does his fly-by across the quad saying hi to the newly arrived employees, the two having survived their internship, the cute inside-nod to only the insiders, like Hitchcock getting off the bus in the background while everyone else is fussing over the dead body in the gutter, business celebrity and entertainment celebrity are revealed to be one and the same, and all of a sudden the illusion is shattered, reality blurs into fantasy (or is it the other way around?), and we cross that barrier from observer into participant.

Everyone seems to be a "package" anymore, but especially so in California, where buzz gave way to heat which is now giving way to trending on Twitter. We've all become marketers of our own "personal brand." It's not enough to star in movies, now you've got to star on Twitter and Facebook and your fan sites, now you've got to have a website and a blog, you've got to write a book about your own personal crisis and how you overcame it so that others might learn from your mistakes because if you "can help just one other person avoid what I went through, then it was worth all the pain I had to overcome."

Barack Obama writes two memoirs before people twice his age even think they have enough life experience to justify one. Every CEO has to write a book about his "secrets" to business success. Every athlete about how she overcame crushing self-doubt to become a champion. Every movie star the tell-all story of drug addiction or sex addiction or some unheard-of addiction or what really goes on between takes on the set.

California was populated from the very beginning with dreamers and schemers. The Gold Rush changed the state only because it drew people who were driven to succeed. You don't uproot your entire family and travel 3000 miles in a covered wagon through searing heat

and stunning cold, through marauding Indians, heartless bandits, and soulless con artists, just for a *chance* to strike it rich unless you're made of strong metal.

California delivered on every promise it ever held out to the newcomer, not to all of them, maybe not even most, but to enough of them that everyone else believed opportunity was still right at the tip of their fingers and if they only reached a little higher, tried a little harder, hung on a little longer, it would be theirs, too.

That's the California Dream. Anything is possible. But possibilities come in an avalanche and they can smother the probabilities. That's why the California Assembly passes legislation to allow transgender high school students to choose whether to use the boys' bathroom or the girls' bathroom rather than tackling what some might consider the much more substantive and vexing challenges of state-employee pension reform or a dwindling economic base or even the fact that movies are being made everywhere in the world *but* Hollywood these days.

Marketing researchers have demonstrated it for years: Too much choice leads to purchase paralysis—and no purchase at all. California is awash in choice. Not only does everyone have his or her own brand, but now each has his or her own cause or interest or addiction or passion. Everyone *talks* about the collective good, but everyone *acts* in their own narrow self-interest. No one rises tall enough to look beyond themselves to see how certain decisions might have benefit for more people.

It's the old saw that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So if you're a gay-rights activist, for example, everything you see is through the lens of your gay activism. Or a pro-choice activist. Or an environmentalist. Or a PETA member. We don't seem content to accept the world as it *is* anymore; we only want to accept it as we think it *should* be. We don't accept that life is unfair or that people might be unequal or luck can make you rich or make you poor; we don't accept it because we refuse to accept that we might not be the masters of our own destiny.

The creationist backlash that refuses to accept random chance as the guiding principle of the universe is matched by an equally ardent anti-Darwinian refusal to accept that we are will-less animals on a passionless stage driven by incomprehensible biochemistry that renders utopia nonsensical and uniformity—including the concepts of equality and justice and humanity—impossible. The Second Law of Thermodynamics prevails. The whole system tends toward increasing entropy. Order consumes energy. Chaos is the rule, disordered uniformity, the zero-energy state. You see a teacup fall from the kitchen table and shatter into little pieces on the floor, but you never see the little pieces suddenly leap up off the floor and assemble themselves into a teacup.

Maybe that's California's problem: Maybe its entropy is increasing, maybe it is moving inexorably toward its zero-energy state of chaos because it simply takes too much energy to try to keep all the pieces together. Too much beauty, too much choice, too much money, too much distraction. That pioneer spirit is still there. California is still populated with

dreamers and entrepreneurs and innovators as much it still is with grifters and scammers and parasites.

I love California for all its contradictions and confusions and frustrations. But it exacts a certain toll from you, a toll you may not even realize is being insidiously levied until you've left; not a physical toll, not even a psychological toll, but a psychic toll, a spiritual toll, a toll that erodes your ability to be in touch with yourself at an important and fundamental level.

In California, sometimes you realize that all you're hearing is the constant chatter of all the little tempting voices and that you've lost the ability to hear just yourself.

So it's time to leave.