



November 20, 2024

MESSENGER

QUOTE FOR TODAY

"You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."
Psalm 118:28, 29

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MY EMPTY BUCKET

John Steinbeck had already written all his great novels¹ when he made the 1960 road trip across America described in his book *Travels with Charlie*.² Charlie was his unlikely poodle-companion during the 10,000-mile-plus journey crisscrossing the continental United States in a camper-equipped Ford pickup truck. According to his son, Steinbeck knew that he would not live much longer because of serious heart issues, and this trip was part of his last look at the land and people he loved.

Maybe you could say that this trip around the USA was at the top of Steinbeck's "**Bucket List**," a slang term for the experiences retirement-aged people hope to be able to have before they "kick the bucket." *The Bucket List* is also the title of a 2007 film that tells the story of a pact made between two terminally-ill men (played by Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson) to actually live out all their lifelong dreams during their remaining days. The story line leads to mixed results, with one of the men dying and the other following through to complete his friend's list.

In real life, Bucket Lists usually remain as unfulfilled dreams until our dying day. Yet, the aspiration itself can carry us through some dark times of suffering and loss. This seems to be a way that God reminds us never to give up hope, but to focus that hope on him.

Personally, I really identify with Steinbeck's love of discovery through travel. But I'd leave Charlie home and bring some caring loved ones instead. My two most memorable road trips across the USA were:

- My 1959 honeymoon trip with Judy in a Nash Rambler, moving from New Jersey to Pasadena CA, following the old Route 66 almost all the way.³
- Our family vacation in 1970, with two small children and a pop-up tent trailer, in which we were able to visit many of the most awesome National Parks.

Would I like to make another long road trip as part of my Bucket List? Not really. But why do I feel that way?

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I find my answer in Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*. Early in his trip, he reflects on the awesomeness of a New Hampshire woods in the fall:

"To find not only that this bedlam of color was true, but that the pictures were pale and inaccurate translations, was to me startling. I can't even imagine the forest colors when I am not seeing them. I wondered whether constant association could cause inattention, and asked a native New Hampshire woman about it. She said that autumn never failed to amaze her; to elate. 'It is a glory,' she said, 'and can't be remembered, so that **it always comes as a surprise.**'"

To me, that's a reminder that no vision I may have of the wonders of nature will ever capture the glory of God's creation. I may look at it in awe today, try to reproduce its beauty with oil paint on canvas, even take a state-of-the-art landscape video, but the essence of *the awesomeness of nature will still be beyond my vision, my understanding, my appreciation.*

A line from Scripture comes to my mind: "**Now we see through a glass, darkly.**"⁴ *In Biblical times, even the finest quality mirror glass was cloudy and distorted. That's the best we can do now in taking in God's wonders around us: cloudy and distorted.*

In the book Steinbeck also writes:

"A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that **we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.**"

So, I'm satisfied with my two major experiences of America by travel. Two different pictures. If I were to take a third, it would be unique and different, but it would still be seeing "through a glass darkly." I'm satisfied to wait for God's final glorious revelation to see what my life in this world was

really about. For now, my bucket is empty.

Pastor George Van Alstine

¹ *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Red Pony* (1933), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Pearl* (1947), *East of Eden* (1952), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961).

² Published 1962.

³ This was before the Interstate Highway System was built.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12, *King James Version*.