

Sursum Corda

[aka preface of *Red, Whites, and the Blues* by John R Hall — © 2020]

The words *sursum corda* reflect something inspiring. The history and etymology for *sursum corda* comes from late Latin: (lift) up (your) hearts; from the opening words.

I suppose it took nearly sixty-two years of navigating my life to be equipped to begin the writing process of *Red, White, and the Blues*. That was how long I had been alive when I finally got down to the nitty-gritty task of wrestling with words while constantly cursing at my unresponsive keyboard. After countless temper tantrums (many occurring at an ungodly hour), in a moment of complete physical and emotional exhaustion, I remembered what Papa Hemingway supposedly said: “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”

This book memorializes a coast-to-coast motorcycle trip I took across my big country—the United States of America—during August and September of 2011. The events are presented through a nonlinear narrative, and the book had to be written this way because deep-rooted memories surface when you are on the road. When I wrote about past events and the effect they had on me and the memories they triggered, I could not exclude writing about how those events and experiences have shaped who I am today—hence the nonlinear writing style.

I kept a private travelogue (or *diary*, if you prefer) and a quasi blog during my cross-country ride. In addition, I sent text messages with pictures attached to a few acquaintances and friends at every noteworthy stop contained in this book. Those text messages and the accompanying pictures were compiled and given to me as a birthday present when I turned fifty-three, which, ironically, coincided with the day after my 2011 motorcycle ride ended.

When needed, I referred to those reference materials for dates and for lodging, dining, and landmark locations of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was a seminal time in my life, and as such it has remained at the forefront of my existence.

My 2011 excursion took me over many physical crossroads and forced me to reflect on the emotional and psychological crossroads of my entire life. Philosophical crossroads are, at best, treacherous, and I also navigated many of them when traffic thinned in the early morning and late evening hours. On the desolate, long roads, where there was nothing except me, a machine, and the hypnotic sound of soaring wind within my wheelhouse, I was finally free to navigate the entirety of my life.

A thirty-six-day American motorcycle ride will take you through cities, towns, villages, rural areas, and swaths of uninhabited land; through barren and lively landscapes; through shifting weather patterns; through America's various moral, social, political, religious, and nonreligious cultures; and briefly through a few people's lives. But as any motorcyclist who has taken a similar road trip will tell you, it is not the *through* that makes the trip worthwhile—it is the unrestrained open road and the uninhibited freedom to dive deep inside oneself that riding a motorbike long and hard is all about. Out there, all alone in the open air, is where people can get down to the core of the matter (to the center of their existence) and discover themselves—it is where *The Edge* reigns supreme.

In 2011, while thousands after thousands of miles rolled by just inches below my feet, something shy of miraculous transpired. I have tried my best to capture the nearly unexplainable, Zen-like state of being I experienced while on my motorcycle. All I can offer the reader is that I glimpsed Valhalla, and Odin assured me that I shall dine with him or Freyja when my internal

combat ends and this soldier's body has been put down. In other words, at least once per day, while upon the seat of a badass motor scooter, I momentarily found peace and self-acceptance.

Those peaceful but fleeting easy feelings I experienced came at a cost. They came as I pondered my life, which triggered the inevitable introspection of being an American citizen. The pages of this book are filled with contemplations that rose from my time experiencing the freedom that America's roads offer, from America's present troubled times, and from my entire life.

I have never understood what possesses people to say, "I am not political." How is it justifiable to be politically disengaged when our lives and our choices are governed by politicians? (That is a rhetorical question, because it is unjustifiable.) To paraphrase Plato: those who are too busy, or are too aloof, or are too smart, or are too dumb, to engage in politics will be punished by being governed by those who are dumber and could not care less about those who are politically disconnected.

The world's business sectors create and finance American nonprofit organizations, think tanks, and political action committees (PACs) to support their ideology. Businesses also employ lobbyists to influence (read *bribe*) politicians, which is why business always sits front and center when American politicians take to the stage (aka the US Senate and the US House of Representatives). The business sectors set America's political agenda and are omnipresent in political debates and the resulting legislation that affect our daily lives. Businesses are constantly engaged in American politics, and therefore the business sectors shape our existence while en masse American citizens proclaim, "I am not political." It is my opinion that Trump's America has fulfilled H. L. Mencken's vision: "On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright

moron.” And that just might be the silver lining in Trumplandia: because in post-Trump (read postapocalyptic) America, the overwhelming masses might finally understand the disastrous consequences and dreadful ramifications of being politically apathetic. Due to my beliefs—and by being a politically engaged American citizen—the pages of *Red, White, and the Blues* will turn political.

The reader has been warned.

In 1983 the phrase “red, white, and the blues” first occurred to me. I clearly remember when it crashed into my mind. I was watching MTV. At that time, MTV was just emerging and starting to change the music business. John Cougar Mellencamp’s music video “Pink Houses” was making its debut on the music channel. “Pink Houses” is much more than simply a catchy tune from yesteryear—it remains relevant because of its brief but deep commentary on American life. It begins with Mellencamp singing about a black man living in a black neighborhood—even his cat is black—but instead of stereotypical American white houses with white picket fences prevailing in his neighborhood, it is pink houses that dot his vicinity. The lyrics further suggest that Americans slave away in the workplace so they can take brief vacations elsewhere. The song’s words and videography further suggest that the future for America’s working-class masses is bleak because *dreams came and went*. That’s the America Mellencamp’s “Pink Houses” paints: downtrodden citizens, segregated communities, and the fallacy of the American dream. It struck a nerve deep within me, and I immediately juxtaposed the black and pink colors within the song’s upbeat tempo and title—and its bleak verbal and visual imagery—against the colors of the American flag.

The title of this book was chosen after pondering my life as an American citizen. I remember my first day of schooling; my education and self-identity began when I was told to

stand and pledge allegiance to the flag (one nation under God). Just four years before my birth, a Presbyterian president named Eisenhower signed congressional legislation dictating that “God” be a part of school children’s indoctrination as good, upstanding American citizens.³

Separation of church and state was supposed to be guaranteed by the clear language contained within the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Self-identification is a tricky thing, second only to chasing the American dream, which is why America’s Constitution contains the following: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Public schools are government institutions. My government, in conflict with its Constitution, made me proclaim the existence of God at six years old. That forced declaration ended up making my search for the American dream confusing and elusive by reinforcing the notion that God (which, in the case of the Pledge of Allegiance, was clearly meant to indicate the convoluted blood of Jesus Christ) was reigning supreme over me and my country.

This book’s title, *Red, White, and the Blues*, reflects the idea of the American dream and the reality of its pursuit. It is taxing (double entendre intended).

The “long and hard ride” motif reflects my journey as an American, and it is also included in the title because of the cross-country motorcycle trip I took after I spontaneously—albeit temporarily—abandoned the American (cash-driven) dream by leaving Boomtown USA in 2011 when North Dakota’s oil boom was rapidly expanding. That bike trip was triggered by a specific event and occurred as a coping mechanism. During my motorcycle ride I traveled over “treacherous terrain,” which can be found in both the physical and psychological realms.

Red, White, and the Blues: A Long and Hard Ride over Treacherous Terrain is essentially a collection of connected essays inspired by a long and hard motorcycle ride, and as such it contains contemplations on human existence arising from my experience of the sights and sounds of my American life.

Daily, I find myself slipping into treacherous waters where I wonder “why” and ponder “if” while the river of life flows around me and its currents spin me around, splitting my attention between the abyss and the shoreline.

One of my favorite musical artists is Edie Brickell. When she stood in front of her New Bohemians bandmates on MTV in 1988, she played a role in triggering my lifelong obsession with introspection. With a sly, playful smile she cleverly sang a song about navigating the turbulent waters of philosophy and religion. In the song, Edie suggests that her thought process is *what it is* and that she’s fine with that—and that she would rather be choked in shallow water than navigate the abyss. The song is titled “What I Am.” When I first heard it, I wholeheartedly agreed with Beavis and Butt-Head when the former said, “This chick is deep!”

To attempt to discover “what one is” requires one to dive deep within. Most people don’t take the plunge. That is no fault of theirs; after all, the *work, buy, consume, and die* modus operandi of modern life—chasing the cash-fueled American dream—leaves little time for reflection.

In the twenty-first century, earning a living requires dedicating much more than half of our life to chasing coveted currency (the neo-American dream). We awake and immediately hop in the shower or dash out the door for work. When the workday is done, we rush home. We wind up exhausted. With or without kids in the mix, life becomes largely void of external matter other

than work, moments of distraction filled with something to entertain, and the isolation of homelife. Existentialism is forced to take an extended—if not permanent—holiday.

Even when the worldwide tribe was forced to stop chasing coveted currency because a pandemic (COVID-19) had caught us in the proverbial headlights, we did not collectively exhale and ponder our role in ensuring one another's existence. Instead, we hoarded toilet paper . . . as if ass-wipes were the secret to eternal life. In Michigan, armed civilians reminiscent of Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch marched into the Senate Chamber and took the high ground, just as any good sniper would do, in a show of force and intimidation. Down on the Senate Chamber's floor, the legislators were sitting ducks—in the United States of America, for Chrissake!⁴

That is how good, God-fearing patriotic Republicans are defending the Constitution of the United States. Without a shadow of a doubt, had the protesters been black, they would not have fared as well as their fair-skinned foils.

For the record: religions and natural disasters and pandemics expose the most endearing and despicable qualities within human beings and politicians (some even trump reality).

Unfortunately, endearing qualities have always been equated to being weak and meek, and therefore the few who strive to serve humanity will have to wait until the sky falls (from the pending chain reaction of climate change) to inherit the earth. COVID-19's arrival on the scene was extremely bad news—there is absolutely no doubt about that! But it's the climate (or nuclear annihilation) that will end *Homo sapiens'* reign, not a respiratory illness caused by a virus that our body's immune system will eventually develop antibodies to defend against—and for which dedicated scientists and medical professionals will develop a vaccine to inhibit a repeat of its disastrous effects. To paraphrase James Carville: *It's the climate, stupid.* The climate will end us because our body's immune system is incapable of overcoming the collapse of Earth's

atmosphere. But you don't see or hear much chatter about that from America's political or business leaders on the daily news or over social media, do you?

The social media era will go down in history as a perplexing monolith. It perfectly displays Newton's third law (in unambiguous pictures and words for all to see) that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. To witness this in action, one need only to watch the Left's and Right's politicians go after each other. Or simply observe the evolving climate debate. When Greta Thunberg says we ought to listen to the scientists and unite behind the science and act on the science, the pushback is immediate—not against the science, but against its messenger, little Greta. The collision of the two forces within the space that social media has commandeered in the cyber realm elicits emotional responses to uncomfortable messages or facts, resulting in abusive ad hominem attacks. Naturally, I will stand accused—and I will plead no contest—of committing the same hair-trigger behavior I so abhorrently despise.

Tu quoque appears to be a prerequisite—a leitmotif—for living in Trump's America. What was once left behind on the sixth-grade playground—"I know you are but what am I?"—has graduated to the White House's Rose Garden and into America's Twitter-in-Chief's Oval Office, and from there has permeated into every nook and cranny of society. I have yet to see or hear any serious colloquy emanating from the Donald's mouth or from his social media feeds, from which his populist beasts constantly feast (binge-eat, if you will) and even gorge themselves into a delirious state of being. Then, after being watered, fed, and fueled by a five-course populist social media buffet of xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, Islamophobia, and, yes, even rabid racism, they regurgitate all over their own social media platforms within their vile virtual realities.

Long before Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, ad infinitum, became ubiquitous, Hunter S. Thompson warned us of their pitfalls when he wrote about how we are alone from birth to death. Not lonely, but alone—alone in our social circles and even when romantically involved. He was making the point that happiness stems from self-respect and that that must come from within and not from possessions or from someone else’s approval. Finding happiness and self-worth is an inside job that comes from negating the desire to be acknowledged as a good person and instead endeavoring to be one as its own reward.

That is my impetus for writing this book: to take a journey recounting two months of my life that triggered me to reflect on my entire American existence, thereby attempting to find out, as Edie said, “What I am.”

I will share with the reader that I am cursed by a vision of being an artist. There are many types of artist: musicians, painters, graphic designers, writers, performers of the written word, mimes, jugglers, comics, balloon sculptors, magicians, and fire eaters. Believe it or not . . . to varying degrees, I have dabbled in each of those arts. And I have survived much of my adult life by being a street performer. The term “struggling artist” invokes images of impoverishment, which is certainly appropriate, but the artist’s struggle continues even after monetary matters are resolved. An artist is constantly trying to make sense of the world and society while searching to find his or her place.

Regardless of the art form, an artist is simply trying to survive. At its core, art is a coping mechanism for the artist—and subsequently for its audience.

Red, White, and the Blues is my way of coping. It is my way of writing on the great American wall that “Kilroy Was Here.”

It is time to get down to it. The game is afoot . . .

and so, from Las Vegas, Nevada,
where the famous Las Vegas Strip's
lights are dimmed and the casinos stand empty,
testifying that COVID-19's quarantine reigns supreme,
Red, White, and the Blues is "submitted for your approval."

— May 1, 2020 ("*Mayday! Mayday!*")

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The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. . . . This is the artist's way of scribbling "Kilroy was here" on the wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass.⁵

—William Faulkner, interview with *Paris Review*, 1956

³ "4 U.S. Code § 4. Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag; Manner of Delivery," Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School: law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/4/4.

⁴ Wright, Robin, et al., "Is America's 'One Nation, Indivisible' Being Killed Off by the Coronavirus?" *The New Yorker*: newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/is-americas-one-nation-indivisible-being-killed-off-by-the-coronavirus.

⁵ William Faulkner (an American writer and Nobel Prize laureate) suggested that US troops wrote "Kilroy Was Here" across Europe during World War II to memorialize that someone was there. It was their way of writing upon the great wall of history that they existed ("I was here"). Prehistoric humans were the first to write "Kilroy Was Here" by drawing on cave walls, thereby leaving evidence that they were there. When considering the unabated proliferation of social media, Faulkner's sociological and philosophical observation from World War II remains relevant. *Red, White, and the Blues* is simply my way of stating, "I was here."