

With Liberty, Justice...

AND BEAUTY FOR ALL

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<https://www.andbeautyforall.org/blog/thislandisourland>

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THIS LAND IS OUR LAND



Photo courtesy of Tim Palmer, taken by Dave Herasimtchuk

As soon as I was old enough to leave home I set out to find America.

I don't mean the heritage or principles that hold the workings of our culture and institutions together, such as they do or fail to do—but the real America—the mountains and plains, the forests and deserts that awaited discovery on my roundabout hitchhiking journey from Pennsylvania to the West Coast. It was all about beauty.

In the spring of my life, 1968, it was all there for the taking or, I should say, for the joining: the peaks that I climbed, the woods where I slept, the rivers where I rinsed away both preconceptions and expectations. It was a journey that opened my eyes to all around me, a journey to be remembered, and one that shaped who I became.

Along the way, people were kind. At the sight of my irrepressible smile owing to my good fortune—I had time for adventure and a backpack with everything I needed propped in front of

me along the road—drivers stopped to offer rides. Their routes and mine coincided for maybe an hour, or sometimes a whole day before reaching the intersection where our paths parted. People fed me lunch, let me sleep in their yards, invited me to family cookouts, offered advice about life, and told stories—lots of stories. Listening to them was one way that I grew up—meaning one way that I opened my mind to others and to the fact that we are all different yet all the same. More beauty, here.



Photo courtesy of Tim Palmer

Not once did I encounter the type of weirdness—stepping into a car, a pickup, or a semi—that everyone fears when I recount this chapter of my exploratory youth in the 1960s. Not that everyone was saintly across the board, but people were almost universally friendly. The characters I met were profoundly varied, but through it all the land beneath us defined our common ground and—as I have since learned—our common destiny. With pride, men and women told me about where they lived. Themes revolved around belonging to the place and, though usually implicit, a love of that land, a sense of dependence on it, and recognition of its undeniable beauty as the sun set on western horizons. Awareness that we shared in the fruits

of those beloved places, and in admiration of them, prevailed. I hitched from one dazzling backpacking destination in national parks or national forests to another with these vivid bouts of socialization in between.

Now seventy-two, I'm fortunate to say I still backpack in wild places, but I don't hitchhike between them much anymore, and neither do others. In this and in more-disappointing ways the welcoming spirit that I found back then seems to be in remission if not squashed by fear of crime or the unknown, or by an alienating sense that we are no longer one people in one country, all aggravated by a toxically addicting narrative of division pushed for political or profiteering means by certain elements of society. No one seems to talk about the beauty that held us together.

And yet, perhaps the spirit of a shared landscape and an intertwined future is just hibernating until the cultural winter thaws and springtime breaks once again for a new journey—more figurative this time around. Our common ground and shared destiny remain on the ground itself—the real America that stretches sea to shining sea. This remarkable landscape has been our unifying principle and possession dating back to ships like the Mayflower when my ancestors were grateful for forested shores after two months at sea and, of course, to Native Americans who had arrived at the opposite end of the continent millennia earlier. Surely this common wealth is more important than any amount of money that can be made by stealing its values from the generations yet to come.

Our destiny in a shared landscape can once again unite us, though the age of innocence I enjoyed is over. How to sustain remnants of unspoiled wilds and to restore health and beauty to everyone's living space are fundamental questions for our collective future that now involves nothing less than the climate we've so consequentially changed—for the worse. With higher temperatures, higher stakes, higher risks, and nearly twice the number of people today, it's not enough to just know that we all occupy the same continental playing-field or artist's canvas; it's now essential that we pull together in addressing the mistakes of the past that, if uncorrected, will lead to an ever hotter world with fires, droughts, floods, rising sea levels, mass extinctions, and related catastrophes on a frightening path to ever greater trouble and loss. Like I said, the age of innocence is over. The age of reform and required redirection is here.

The kindness that I found hitchhiking across our country half a century ago has faded from people's memory or, sadly, many of us never knew the feeling of a shared homeland that I, for a time, was privileged to know. Yet the sense of belonging, together, that I found inspiring fifty years ago might again have the power to mend our society. A new discovery awaits anyone who is willing, in their own way, to make a journey—not just to find, but also to rescue America.

Tim Palmer is the author of *The Heart of America: Our Landscape, Our Future; America's Great Mountain Trails*; and other books, many of them featuring photos of our country's beauty. See his work at www.timpalmer.org.