

Subject: bookstore presentation 2nd draft

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Book Presentation
#1

(this one starts in Texas, a bit more upbeat)

Thank you.

Let me start us off deep in the heart of Texas, with this little description from the book:

About 160 miles west of El Paso, the Long X Ranch spreads over mountains and valleys for as far as you can see... The white adobe ranch headquarters dates to the 1880s and is nestled in trees next to a spring. In back of the main house is a line of stone bunkhouses, all with made-up beds and bathrooms, just in case someone might stop by. Actually, up to forty people could stop by.

Mary Jo met me at the door. She was very trim in new blue jeans and a blue shirt--her dark hair pulled business-like into her cowboy hat...

The men and women who work the ranch are better looking than any cowboys or cowgirls ever dreamed up by Hollywood. Their eyes are bluer and squintier, their wide-brimmed, white hats are wider and more stained with character. Their spurs jingle and their leather chaps and holsters squeak as these men and women pass you in the room and say, honestly, "Howdy, Ma'm." They defer to Mary Jo with tips of their hats and assent to her orders, yet they all eat at the same long table for breakfast, supper and dinner... Ranch life is a world apart from modern, industrialized American culture where things are scheduled on pocket computers and there never seems to be a satisfying ending to anything. On the ranch, the colt gets born, the herd gets moved, the fence gets mended, it rains or it doesn't. A person's connection with the earth is constant and intimate, and one's position on the food chain is quite visible and a matter for vigilance.

Life is exuberantly laid bare: The cowboys and cowgirls of the valley were not much for urban discretion, and I so enjoyed, for the three days I headquartered there, a swirl of news about romances and jealousies. Stories were told in the kitchen, which was big enough for a good bunch of folks. There is a beautiful, old stove, great cooking vessels, and a fine view up the hill. Stories were also told in the dining room, around the long,

trestle tables across from the fireplace.

In Texas, especially, I think there is a tincture of some aphrodisiac in the branch water. Perhaps energy seeps into the subterranean rivers from those vast stores of liquid energy being pumped into the pipelines by those countless, copulating metal sculptures that dot the landscape east of the Long X. Or perhaps it is ranch life generally, where one sees so much nature all day long and does not want to feel left out of the fun. One evening, I watched from the edge of a small, round corral. Inside, a teenaged Clay Furlong, was breaking a colt with great patience and caution, and with very few but important words of advice from his father, perched nearby. The young colt would be calm and easy, then he would bolt. Then he would be easy again, as the young man walked him around and around and gradually introduced him to a bridle and then to a small saddle. We watched this as the sky grew dark and a million stars and a brilliant, red Mars came out. Bats flicked around over the corral, barely visible against the western sky, where only a faint wedgewood glow remained. Soon, and by bright starlight, the boy was riding the colt. The creature, its head and tail high, seemed to be fine with it. The evening air was filled with dust and the sound of hooves and low conversations: Clay and his father over here in the corral, and Mary Jo and some of the boys over there, evaluating this new addition to the workforce. By 8:30, when the last color was gone from the sky, we had all turned in. I was so comfortable to be in a place where the sun again measured my day, telling me when to get up and go to work, and when to go to bed. You can get a great deal done in such a day.

In the blue dawn light on the morning I left, Mary Jo and the men came around to the front of the ranch house on their horses for a quick good-bye. I was leaving to bite off another ten miles of highway and they were off to bring some of the herd from the parched upper range down to a valley where there was still some grass. I silently prayed they would have some rain soon. They tipped their hats like they do, and turned to gallop off in the early light, with Mary Jo in the lead.

As you can see, the America I discovered was, in many ways, the America we sometimes think has faded away into our history. It is all still out there: the hard work, the courage, the adventure. I discovered in my walk that it is never too late to find that adventure and to savor it.

I also discovered that Americans are struggling to connect with deep meaning in their lives. Here is a passage from the book on that subject:

"A woman of about fifty had parked her car behind us and was trying to catch up to us on foot. When I saw she was struggling and not going to make it, I stopped and walked back to her. She spread her arms out; her eyes were streaming tears. She gave me a great hug and tried to speak, but just shook her head back and forth as she looked at me, trying to make a word come. I could only smile at her and say that it was all right and this was a good place for me to take a rest, so there was no hurry. She finally got her voice and said breathlessly that she was just coming back from the doctor in the city and had seen me walking. It seemed clear to me that she had received some hard news. "Are you all right?" I asked her. "Well, not as well as you are, I guess," is all she would say through a sardonic smile. She gave me another hug and turned away to walk back to her car.

"I do not know what she was thinking about or how her life had turned to make this moment so intense for her. But, after scores of little moments like this, I had come to understand that people have a great, unmet need to live a life that expresses their passions and values and they think they are being cheated out of that life--that they will die and it will have passed them by. They see an old woman doing something she believes in and she somehow carries this ineffable something for them. Our shallow culture makes us people of great longing, for we are not always provided with opportunities to live out our most meaningful beliefs.

"What, indeed, would the community look like if it was the perfect expression of our best instincts and deepest beliefs? The difference between that ideal and our actual lives is the gap that, like a stretched elastic, energizes both our political emotions and our sense of personal longing. Politics, in this sense, is a much more personal thing than we give it credit for.

"Now, to prove to you beyond any reasonable doubt that I am not a perfect bearer of meaning into people's lives, let me inform you that I do not remember the name of the profoundly touched woman who embraced me along the road, but, just a few miles further, the man who owns the barbecue rib joint and who invited me in for a free lunch is Mr. John McKenzie.

That passage represents the kind of experience I had constantly on the road. Here is another brief example:

"There were often crowds now along the road, and more hands to touch and hugs to receive. Sometimes the reaction was a great mystery to me--like a young black man, perhaps in his early twenties, who had come out of his sickbed at his mother's suggestion to stand at the end of his driveway to see me pass. When I approached, he broke down

and wept for no purpose that I could understand. I held him and made light of it, but he continued to weep and became unable to stand. I don't know what this is, I said to myself. It may or may not be good."

What was it? Well, I think we are all starving for more meaning in our lives. We are starving for people to believe in, to trust. That starving that I saw was sad, and yet it told me that people's values are safely rooted in deep soil. They long for a world that reflects their values--values which I found to be strong, secure and based in love.

I fell in love with America and with Americans all over again on this long walk. It also gave me the opportunity to see America through the eyes of those who took time to walk with me. Here is an example:

"On the far side of Dallas I finally had time to just walk again and relax. Much of it was alongside a beautiful man, Golam Mohammed, who had come to America from India ten years earlier. He was walking with me to celebrate the dream of America in his heart. Frankly, I think if anyone from nearly any other country in the world could see the America that Golam and I saw--all the kindness, openness, and the relative lack of class distinctions--they would have applied for a visa the next day.

"You cannot imagine what it means for most people of the world to be able to walk down a country road, shout a "Hi!" to someone working in a field, and to get a wave and a "Hi" in return. We take that sort of open friendliness and absence of class barriers for granted in America and other free and democratic countries. What the writer Richard Rodriguez calls that "Jeffersonian Hi," is rooted so deeply in our dream of equality that we do not even see it. But people from many other parts of the world do. On many continents, the passerby would never think to call a greeting across to a stranger. And, if such a word was indeed sent across a field, the worker might just stare, wondering what this person meant and whether it was appropriate to speak in return.

"Howdy!" Golam, with his dear subcontinental accent, would shout to a fellow working on an old truck. "Hi!" the reply would come, usually with a wave.

Not only did I have the privilege of seeing things through their eyes, but through their hearts. I cannot tell you what wonderfully interesting people are to be found in every valley and hill and plain of this country. Here is Virginia Hallack:

"On Sunday afternoon, I returned to the desert floor to resume my walk the next morning, but I felt changed. Whatever part of Dundee had dried out in me in these lonely years had been refreshed somehow. I was more my old self--that is to say, my young self. And that evening, staying in the trailer home of Virginia Hallack, was the icing on the cake.

"Now, Doris. Sit down right here, and I will give you a concert!" she said after dinner.

"I sat and sipped my tea as she picked eighteen instruments off the wall one-by-one and played and sang "On the Road to Mandalay" for the rest of the evening. Trumpet, fiddle, flute, banjo, and on and on, with vocals in her high-pitched voice where breath would allow. It may seem comical as I describe it, but it was in fact quite something. Here was a woman in the vast desert of New Mexico letting her every breath make the best music she could muster. Your breath can blow through more instruments than you can imagine, and they were all there at Virginia's.

"So she sang, strummed, pounded and blew her song into the night as I tapped my toes. I imagined that the lizards and the desert rabbits outside were doing the same, swinging back and forth with a smile and a loving stare at Virginia's little trailer in the desert, all of us amazed at what can be done with the breath of a life.

And so I was amazed at the breath of my own life. I never knew if I could really make it. Always ahead were the Appalachian Mountains. I could barely get to the top of a desert hill. How could I expect to cross those great mountains in winter? In fact, I crossed them in blizzard conditions. I don't know how I did it, other than to tell you that if you will just put one foot in front of the other, you can do anything and go anywhere.

I did not do it alone. Many people helped me. When I began the walk I had recently lost my husband and my best friend. I had good friends in my hometown, but I felt very much alone after my Jim had died, and my best friend, Elizabeth. But as my walk continued, I found more and more good, deep friends that I know I would die for and they would die for me. Here is a snapshot:

"Nick Palumbo, my young carpenter friend from Chicago who had walked with me in New Mexico, arrived as I approached Memphis. He had worked carpentry jobs to earn his road money and now was ready to join me for the rest of the way. He and Jason hit it off very nicely. They would take turns driving the support vehicle and walking with me, and were

both full of joyful observations as we moved through this interesting landscape. They would sleep in the vehicle or where a bed was offered, and they lived on a mixture of offered home cooked meals and junk food. Serious John Anthony was with us too, living in the same way out of the vehicle, and often wrestling with the laptop computer or making phone calls ahead. In the Delta we were unknown vagabonds; it was great fun to be traveling together toward Washington, a stranger destination than any Oz. We talked to the people along the way to explain the purpose of the walk and to ask their opinions. "So you can tell all these medium-build, dark-haired, twenty-somethings apart if you ever meet them: Nick is the ill-shaven, sleepy-eyed, cool customer who looks a bit like James Dean on his day off; Jason is the bright-eyed, tweedy, collegiate type you might think just hatched a great practical joke or started a computer company; John is the serious fellow with the well-trimmed, beatnik beard. He might be a record producer or, in a tux, a classical musician.

"Sometimes, when we were far from anyone who might hear us and laugh, we sang as we walked. Nick's father had belonged to a barbershop quartet, so Nick knows all the old songs. His brother, unfortunately, inherited the family voice. No matter: These were the songs I knew and danced to as a young girl, and they gave me great energy as we walked and walked. The summer heat was moderating--thank goodness for that.

Earlier, back in Arizona, others had walked with me. Great characters who gave their all to my project. Here are Herb and Matt:

"In the evening, as I walked down the dusty road, Matt and Herb were atop a low hill, silhouetted against the sunset like two Scarlet O'Haras, shaking their fists at each other and having a wonderfully loud argument about Native American culture. The villagers were watching from their patios and yards. The argument had something to do with all the litter strewn about, centuries of repression, environmentalism, racism, etc. Those two had wonderful arguments from time to time, though I believe they are good friends at some deep and hard to locate level. They are both intense reformers. Matt is young. He came close to joining the priesthood, I believe, but instead got a law degree and does the Lord's work on Capitol Hill for Common Cause. Herb has been a reform organizer all his life, in addition to his careers. They are both handsome and wonderful to be around. It is quieter to be with them individually, however.

"Herb is an explainer, which would drive Matt crazy. "If you ask him what time it is,"

Matt told me, "Herb will tell you, but he'll also tell you how the watch is made." Herb is also a tenacious organizer. He will argue with complete strangers about how they are the problem if they are not voting. He gets quite worked up. He is right about it, but one does have to come to the rescue of strangers from time to time.

Well, the friendships grew and the word spread. When I walked the final miles to the U.S. Capitol building, some 2,300 people were walking with me and having a wonderful time. Here is how some of them described that moment. I don't read these to brag, but to show you what fun it was, and what people got out of it:

Granny's walk and her stories taught me not to be afraid. No matter how alone I am now as an activist, I can be assured that I will find support and friendship along the way. She also taught me not to be afraid of being vulnerable. Being vulnerable opens others' hearts to hear what you have to say.

--Diana McCourt

The last time I marched for a cause was as a teenager in my native Switzerland -- a candlelight procession through the dark streets of Zurich to protest against the Russian invasion of Hungary. Yes, 1956! I've long since become a U.S. citizen, and can't remember having felt so joyous and hopeful about being able to affect a public issue as when I was walking last Tuesday through the sunny streets of Washington, banging a Brazilian carnival noisemaker to the rhythm of *GO GRANNY GO!* Let's continue the good fight at her side!

--Regina Bringolf, Hancock, NH

Until you walk America, you cannot understand its beauty and you cannot begin to understand the kindness of her people.

In Cumberland, Maryland, the people of the town heard I was coming and they heard it would be my 90th birthday. They marched through their streets with me, waving American flags and singing "This Land is Our Land." They boosted me up on the back of a caboose in their lovely train station so that I could make a birthday speech. The America

that you might think is long gone is in fact still there, waiting for you.

If I have any single message for you, it is that it is never too late to get in shape. It is never too late to do a great thing. It is never too late to go in search of your deepest values and your wildest dreams of brotherhood. Everything still awaits you. Everything is still laid out in front of you. It isn't even over when the fat lady sings, for I had more than a few of them sing, and still I had a hundred adventures more.

Now. I want to get to any questions you might have. But finally let me tell you that the ~~issue~~ I walked for is far from resolved. The Senate has approved the McCain-Feingold bill, but there is a good chance it will die in the House of Representatives, or that they will change it so much that it will have to go to a Senate-House conference committee, where the anti-reformers will let it die.

Here is our national problem: The cost of our elections has sent our senators, representatives and presidents running away from us in every direction to raise money. The interests of Americans of modest means, and the interests of a healthy planet, have taken a back seat to the demands of multinational corporations and billionaires, who now control our elections. That situation is worth walking across the country for at any age, and I am glad I did it. I'm sure that if you fought in a war to defend democracy, or if you have lost relatives or loved ones in that constant effort, you will agree with me that our freedoms fundamentally depend upon our ability to choose people at election time who will represent our interests and values. I hope you will agree that we must return our elections to a proper human scale.

I walked for one reason. So that I might ask you here to make one phone call, and you might agree to do it, because of my effort. I ask you, and all Americans, to call their U.S. Representative and demand passage of the campaign finance reform bill, and to pass it in a form that will not require a Senate-House conference committee. Please do this for me. I cannot imagine anything further I can do in the short time remaining to earn the right to ask that favor of you.

Thank you very much.
