

FIFTY-FIFTY



The Clarity of Hindsight



Julie L. Kessler

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To my mother, daughter, and husband: my personal trifecta of having been given life, having given birth, and having given and received an abundance of love. You are my *raison d'être* and my air, for the last fifty years and the next fifty. And to my dear Burt, the very best friend ever in the history of the world. For yesterday, for today and for tomorrow.

With love always, JLK

Foreword

When I sat down in the departure lounge of Air Asia at Changi Airport in Singapore and started tapping away at my laptop as I waited for my flight to Denpasar, I could hardly believe the title I had typed. Who in the hell was *fifty* years old and what did I have to say about that anyway?

The harsh reality is that despite continuous exercise and reading to stay fit in both body and mind, attempted sun avoidance to postpone the losing wrinkle battle, and my fifty-year-old husband's description of me as his much younger wife, I was in fact staring head on at the big five-oh. Although I couldn't quite believe it myself, on that day in July in Singapore, and contrary to my kind husband's assertions, I was, in fact, fifty years old.

But what did I have to say about that which would be worth reading? I'm still not sure, but hope that readers will indulge me while I recount some of the more important lessons I've learned along this fascinating and well-traveled road.

A friend I have known for more than twenty years, who is forty-nine and who also happens to be my dentist, told me a couple of weeks ago, while staring into my mouth, that the thing that freaked him out the most about turning fifty was not the actual number, but "the idea that his ride was more than half-way over." While I certainly understood what he was talking about, I don't think of it that way at all. This is mostly because I think the second half of life is so much more interesting than the first half in the sense that we are more aware of who we are and much more accepting of the person we have become. We are also much more aware of what's important in life, and also more aware that, just like a roll of paper towels, life goes much

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faster as you near the end. Or perhaps as you inch closer to the next journey onward.

As a child and teenager, I used to ask my mother what age she wished she could be. She would always respond in the same way. She wanted to be exactly the age she was at that moment, but perhaps with the body of a younger woman. She was very clear that she didn't want to be eighteen or twenty-one again, or even thirty. She appreciated the insight and wisdom that living gave her, and accepted with a rare grace the often bizarre road she traveled right up to the end of her life, which came just three months following her fifty-first birthday.

In her honor, and to mid-centurions everywhere, I devote these writings. The very best is right now and exactly where you are headed. Wherever that may be.

JLK

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The Clarity of Hindsight

Travel a lot. Pack lightly.

Everyone who knows me, even marginally, knows I love to travel. Some of my friends call me by the honorific Jet Fuel Jules. It is a moniker I've worn proudly. Indeed, there was a period when I could recite from memory airfares to certain cities abroad and seat configurations of many aircraft. And I knew all about the latest and best gravity-defying carry-on wheelie bags. I still travel a lot, but it has become more mindful now that I have a husband, career, kids, dogs, and a house. I've come to believe, however, that all those responsibilities of life and the desire to travel the world are, as Tim Cahill so aptly put it in the *Accidental Explorer's Guide to Patagonia*, "not necessarily antagonistic ambitions."

There are so many amazing places the world over that can airmail the soul into overdrive. There is an openness and a vulnerability when one travels in unfamiliar locales. It creates a certain ability to step outside yourself. While trying the new and the different, one actually gets to *be* new and different almost effortlessly, and without the confining judgments usually encountered on home turf. That is why travel so often alters you after the fact. Even when you're back in the routine of life. Often in immeasurable ways, and more often than not, for the better.

I've noticed, though, that two people can go to the same destination, even at the same time, and have such different experiences. I believe that this is because how we view the world and our place in it is filtered through the prism of our past. Along with whatever baggage we possess which won't, no matter how

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hard we try, fit into the overhead compartment. It is also filtered by whatever we need to learn at the time. Sometimes we're open to the lesson right before our eyes, and sometimes we're not. Books can certainly transport us to another world and another time, but travel on the other hand, can often transport you to an altogether different state of being.

As Mark Jenkins correctly wrote in *The Ghost Road*,

Adventure is a path. Real adventure—self-determined, self-motivated, often risky—forces you to have firsthand encounters with the world. The world the way it is, not the way you imagine it. Your body will collide with the earth and you will bear witness. In this way, you will be compelled to grapple with the limitless kindness and bottomless cruelty of humankind—and perhaps realize that you yourself are capable of both. This will change you. Nothing will ever again be black-and-white.

Personally, I have never gone for hard-core adventure travel—not for a lack of interest, but probably out of simple self-preservation. The most “adventurous” thing I’ve ever done was probably a twelve-hour trek starting a few miles outside the small mountain resort town of Sapa, about 400 miles north of Hanoi, near the Chinese border, in the company of an interpreter and eight women from the traditional Red Dao tribe. These women ranged in age from twenty-five to forty. And the reason I know this is because these women’s response to the presence of a Caucasian woman in their remote area of the world went in one swift breath, something like this: “Hi, and how old ARE you?” Thus, to be polite, as I learned from my interpreter, I was obliged to ask the same question in return. It was an interesting and glorious outing with its fair share of craggy, narrow, and often wet and frightening invisible mountain trails to traverse in order to reach the women’s remote mountain village, which was spread across

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the mountain top. But the trip was worth it, notwithstanding the recurring shakiness in my legs—though I made it a point never, ever to look down. Besides their colorful and very thick traditional layered clothing, they each wore what appeared to be five pounds of ornate silver jewelry. Even though I had an inkling that I was certainly not in Kansas anymore, I was not prepared mentally for the extremely harsh nature of this tribe's existence, which I'm pretty sure has not changed in the last several hundred years. Water was still pumped by hand from outdoor spigots, none of the thatched huts had electricity, grain was stored in loft-like structures above their sleeping areas, oxen did hard field labor, and chickens and goats roamed freely underfoot. And I'm fairly certain none of these women (who all looked decades older than their stated ages) or their children had ever seen a medical school trained doctor. I had been told to bring small, lightweight gifts for the village children we would encounter along the way, and so I was armed with a cache of lollipops, ballpoint pens and balloons. It became clear that these children had never seen a balloon before and didn't know their purpose. Much to my horror, several had put them right into their mouths and started chewing them, believing them to be some oddball western candy, until the interpreter showed them how to blow them up.

I also once went on a shark-feeding scuba dive in French Polynesia with a PADI-certified dive master who was clearly fearless, or perhaps just senseless. We had gone down to about sixty feet below the surface with a large, party-sized, plastic Igloo-style ice chest secured by a rope tethered to our boat overhead. When the group of six divers and the dive master had equalized our pressure and weights so that we would be still at the bottom of the ocean floor, the dive master tugged on the rope tied to the chest. Then the captain, who remained on-board the boat, pulled on the rope until it and the ice chest's lid disappeared. Inside the ice chest, which we really hoped contained cold beer, were instead perhaps fifty pounds of freshly

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dead and bloody fish. In a matter of maybe five seconds, there were at least thirty sharks, many of which were six or seven feet in length, circling the group in what can only be described as a total feeding frenzy. There were black-tip sharks, lemon sharks and a few hammerhead sharks, which we were told weren't interested in eating mere mortals when there was fresh, lifeless fish to be had. This is all well and good on a theoretical level, but every certified diver knows that sharks are virtually blind, and I surely didn't want to be confused for a Cro-Magnon culinary delight. Shark skin is also like very harsh sand paper and I didn't want any of them bumping into me either. In a tribute to what can only be described as good genes and perhaps even better luck, it was nothing short of a major miracle that I didn't have a myocardial infarction right then and there. That I lived to tell this story only proves just how blind sharks really are. All I could think of that evening, following several martinis—beer simply would not have had the requisite speedy medicinal effect—was that this particular dive was by far the stupidest thing I had done to date. And trust me, I have done some pretty damned stupid things in fifty years.

There have also been the more “usual” scary travel experiences. I had my purse torn off my shoulder one summer evening by two young punks whizzing by on a motor scooter on a street in Seville, Spain. And I was once closely followed by an older Arab man in a narrow and winding part of the old Kasbah in Tangier, Morocco, who made disparaging comments about my alleged ethnicity. I finally turned around to face the old man and stared him down in a lame attempt not to show any fear. But I was scared. The old Arab was correct in his ethnic allegations—not that I came clean to him as to my bloodlines, since I did not wish to leave any of mine there on the street as a Moroccan souvenir. These isolated negative experiences notwithstanding, I can say with certainty that, while unpleasant at best, they would not stop me and have not stopped me from continuing my travels.

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I've often said that traveling abroad made me more American. More American in the sense that, while abroad, I've often felt like some sort of ambassador, and, oddly, found myself defending presidents I didn't vote for and policies I abhorred. This was most certainly the case during my travels while George W. inhabited the White House. It was a bizarre juxtaposition that I haven't always been able to explain, even to myself. Somehow, being abroad, or if you are lucky, living abroad as an expatriate, allows a certain larger ability to be American. And then when I would return home, I'd find that I would put on my international hat, arguing the position or policy of whatever country I had just come from.

Travel also allows one, it seems, to be American in a way one simply cannot while stateside. I have found that I am somehow able to see myself in purely national terms, allowing me to dismiss race, religion, locale and even family while on the road. Traveling for an extended period of time or being an expatriate permits a certain illusion, allowing the traveler to try on different ways of identifying as an American in its most theoretical form. Or perhaps it allows a level of understanding, self-invention or reinvention of which one is deprived at home.

Also important is the fact that changes of scenery often serve to remind you of other possibilities and other avenues in your own life. It is not always necessary to hop on an aluminum tin can and head into the sometimes-turbulent skies at 30,000 feet in order to do that. However, a physical change of scenery often gives you a psychological perspective that may simply be unattainable in the familiar surroundings of your home turf. And it is okay to feel lost sometimes and go in search of finding your way, with or without a good map. Sometimes getting lost helps you get found. But when you go, and go you should, wherever you think might tickle your fancy or pique your interest, pack as lightly as possible. Figuratively and literally. Make sure and leave all of your preconceived notions and expectations at home. If you want everything and everyone to be exactly the same as

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at home, then there is little point in making the journey. The whole point is to see differently, go differently, be different and learn from all that those differences entail. And as a practical matter, nearly everything you think you might need (but probably don't) can be bought wherever you are headed. So pack lightly. You—and your back, neck and shoulders—will be glad you did.

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