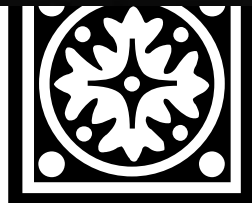
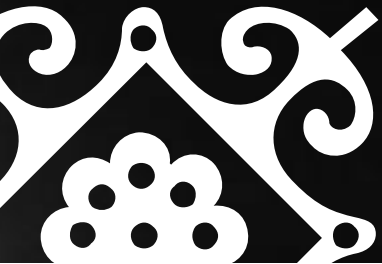


# AN INQUIRY INTO LIVING WHILE WALKING THE ROADS OF





# AMERICA, MEXICO, AND BEYOND

JEFFREY SAWYER

*A few years ago, Jeffrey Sawyer quit his job, sold all his possessions, and set out walking from Asheville, North Carolina. He had no destination in mind and no goal except to inquire into the meaning of life, love, and freedom. After traveling as far as Minnesota, he returned to where he started. Since then he has taken many such journeys, not only in the continental U.S. but in Mexico, Hawaii, and Southeast Asia. Everywhere he goes, he carries little or no money and does most of his traveling on foot. The following excerpts are from an unpublished book about his experiences on the road.*

— Ed.



**HAZARD**, Kentucky, April 2001: It had rained quite a bit, and the cool weather refreshed my tired legs and mind. The birds began to sing early, and the mist lifted from the sorrows of the valleys to the bluing sky. Coal trucks streamed up and down the back mountain roads twenty-four hours a day, hugging each sharp turn with an uncanny precision, nudging me closer to the edge. It was tough walking in those parts.

There was a great longing and loneliness inside me. And as I delved into this loneliness, I asked, “Is there an ultimate freedom?” I would eventually walk some thirty-five hundred miles of back roads in the United States and Mexico. Having left behind everything I knew, I had nowhere to go, nothing to do but die into this question. I’d never really wished to be an explorer, yet this inquiry moved me to let go of all that was not entirely new and alive. So my walking journey began.

Though others may be able to look within themselves without leaving job, home, family, and friends, it was solitude that captivated me. I wished to give all my attention to exploring the capacities of the heart and mind. As I walked, a few questions became predominant: Must a person work, and what happens if one does not? What happens when one has no money and no motive to get any? Is it possible to live entirely free in this culture?

I had needed a vehicle only to drive to work, so I had sold my truck to pay off my debts and given away what else I owned. As I had no cottage in the woods to which I could retreat, walking seemed the most obvious course. For two and a half years I walked back roads connecting small towns. The roads and communities became a monastery of sorts to me, a place for playful inquiry.

In the mountains I took trails to shorten distances or provide a respite from the cars. But mostly I stuck to lightly traveled roads. I didn’t hitchhike, but I accepted rides if people offered them of their own accord. It was a fine way to meet people. Also, it seemed rude to decline if someone was willing to risk pulling over for a strange man. Resting a spell in the car was a treat, too.

In my pack I carried a mosquito net, a pair of linen pants, a bathing suit, a blanket, two ponchos, a fleece jacket and hat, a long-sleeved shirt, two T-shirts, a pair of socks, some matches, and a bit of flour and salt. I wore a pair of sandals. With these items I could fit in anywhere, or at least not stick out as an oddity. I carried no ATM card, no credit card, and no tent. Most of the time I had no sleeping bag and no money. When I did have

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money, it was usually just a few dollars, certainly no more than thirty.

“How do you eat if you have no money?” people would ask me. At first, I familiarized myself with edible plants and spent my days with my eyes to the ground, finding things to throw into an evening stew with some salt: chickweed, dandelion leaves, violet leaves, wild onions, flowers, shoots, acorns. I would heat them up over a fire and eat them in the evening. With some flour, I would roll the leftovers into dumplings and take them with me on the road.

It seemed that, as hunger arose, I would be drawn instinctively to edible mushrooms and plants. The more quiet and attuned to the environment my mind became, the more effortless living was.



**EARLY** one afternoon, I was tired and hungry. I'd already had a full day: cars and trucks flying by, dead groundhogs, the smell of exhaust, cigarette butts, downed butterflies, and jeers from a passing sports car. I had also run out of food, and the nearest town was some ten miles up the Blue Ridge Parkway. I saw a large oak tree and thought it would be nice to sit by it for a time and ponder the nature of hunger more thoroughly. I walked up to the tree and looked around its base to find a nice spot for my back. As I poked my head around the far side, I spotted a great batch of a wild mushroom sometimes called “chicken-of-the-woods.” My spirits soared. I took out my little pocketknife and cut into the brainlike orange fungus.

At first I thought I had best grab just enough for a meal and let the rest be. Tomorrow would take care of itself. Then I told myself I had better take a bit more, just to be safe. So I cut away three football-sized hunks of the heavy mushroom. It didn't feel quite right taking more than I needed, but it made sense, since I was far from civilization and didn't want to be hungry again the next day. I put the mushrooms in a bag and strapped them to my pack.

Walking along a trail through the forest, I found a fire pit and a log to sit on under some huge hemlock trees. I stopped and sautéed the mushrooms with a bit of salt and some wild onions. They tasted just like marinated chicken. I couldn't recall a meal so delicious.

I thought it best to cook up some mushrooms for dinner as well. While I cooked, I ate some more. It was going to be a tough walk up these hills, and I didn't want to run short of energy. Surely the rest of the mushrooms would not keep uncooked until the next day, so I sautéed them too, eating all the while.

While I was bagging up the cooked mushrooms, I began to feel sick to my stomach. I was stuffed, my belly aching. I lay on the leaves under the hemlock trees to rest.

I had become greedy. I had carved out too many mushrooms from the tree because I was afraid. Because I had too many, I had eaten too many.

Still, I didn't want to let food go to waste. I tied the bag to

the side of my pack. It made me feel lopsided and weighed me down as I made my way up the hills. My stomach was bloated. It was a long walk.

The next day I woke and ate some more chicken-of-the-woods for breakfast. For lunch, though I wasn't hungry, I ate a bit more. They tasted like duty now, not the singing mushrooms they'd been when I'd first eaten just enough. I threw out the rest, which had begun to smell. As I pushed the bag into a trash can, my mood lightened.



**AFTER** a time I stopped worrying so much about food and just walked north, talking with people along the way. I ate what became available and soon became indifferent to whether I ate or not. I came to the conclusion that, for me, understanding was more important than food. I may not have had a piece of chicken, but I had a peace of mind. This attended to my hunger for days, whereas when I had more food without understanding the root of desire, it wasn't long before I became agitated, fearful, and again hungry.

I usually had a dollar or less in my pocket, but ultimately food would show up. A person would ask, “You want something to eat?” or perhaps a loaf of bread would fall off a truck. One time I found ninety-five dollars along a curb. Sometimes there was just enough money on the ground to buy some fruit or soup. But mostly food came from unpredictable places: a library pizza day in Pennsylvania; a generous homeless man in Mexico; a sandbar picnic on the Mississippi with one of the leaders of the Teamsters Union; venison from a man's freezer in Iowa. It became clear that the amount of food I could gather or buy by my own doing was negligible in comparison to the abundance that arrived when I ceased making any effort at all.



**I WAS** sitting on the curb by a convenience store near the Carolina coast. The Lay's-potato-chip deliveryman came by and asked, “You waiting to go to work?”

“No.”

“What are you doing?”

“Walking up the road.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Near Ocean City,” I answered.

“You want a bag of chips?”

“Sure.”

“How is it?” he asked.

“How is what?” I replied.

“Walking,” he said.

“Probably a lot like driving a chip truck,” I said. “Some days it's tough, and some days it's the most beautiful thing in the world.”

He shook his head. “Out walking the earth . . . How are

you on change?”

“I’m OK.”

He smiled and jumped back into his truck, still shaking his head.

I walked up the road eating the chips and thinking, “OK” *on change? I have seven cents.* But I was OK — or, at least, I had been before I’d realized I could be better off.



**I HAD** this question: Did I experience fear around money because I had too little of it, or because I had too many desires? When I had excess money, did I create more things to want and subsequently become worried about obtaining them? This dilemma provided another opportunity for inquiry. I used my life, myself as the subject.

In my travels along the road, people would often tell me, “You know, I’ve always wanted to give away everything I have, just leave it all and take off with no thought of coming back. But I have just a few more years on my pension,” or, “. . . my kid is almost out of school,” or, “. . . I’m in debt.”

“But here,” they’d say, “take twenty dollars. I love what you’re doing.”

Like this, money would come, and though at the time I didn’t really need it, turning it down seemed to offend the giver. The money also gave me an opportunity to find out how rarely it brought me a true sense of security. Some days I would give away all the money I had, to see if the absence of it made me miserable. It didn’t. Rather, the giving opened up my mind and heart to an abundance that exists regardless of whether one has money or not. It seems that, unless we give up the psychological hold on what we think is ours, we don’t see the bounty all around us. So I made a guideline for myself if I forgot the abundance that I was amidst: I would spend any money I was given or had found by the end of the day; otherwise I would pass it on to another.

Adhering to the guideline wasn’t always easy. At times I still found security in the knowledge that I could duck into a coffee shop for a snack or to sit when it was rainy and cold. I was certainly grateful for the money and the opportunities it provided, but if I ran out of things to spend it on, I would end up buying chips and sodas and other items that I didn’t need.

After a year and a half, having found that one can live a full and rich life without working, and without money, I would do odd jobs for a nominal fee a few days a month, every few months. In no city across America was I unable to make thirty dollars in a matter of hours.



**FROM** the mountains of North Carolina, I had made it as far as Chicago. A wonderful person I met there arranged for me to stay in an apartment near Loyola University. I had only

a couple of dollars and some change, but it was enough to buy some beans, rice, and flour at a little Mexican market a few blocks away. After two months of walking, this arrangement was a glorious gift. I spent my days swimming, writing, and talking with people by the lake.

Many college students lived in the building, and as I left each day to go down to the water, I would pass the dumpsters slowly. Often I would find something there that I could use, like a perfectly good flannel shirt or a laundry-detergent box with soap still in it.

I had a dollar in my pocket that I had been saving since I’d arrived in the city. It is one thing to have no money on the road or in the woods, but in a city you can’t legitimately go into a store or coffee shop without at least a dollar. If I had no money and someone invited me out, I couldn’t go without saying right off the bat that I couldn’t pay. With a dollar, however, I could at least buy someone a soda and sit and talk. So for this new city dweller, the difference between having a dollar and having no money was a big one.

One morning I left the apartment on my way to the lake. I walked by the dumpster and took a glance, but there were just some old books, a computer monitor, and a wooden chair. I walked on.

“Hey, you got a dollar I can have?” a man asked me in front of McDonald’s. “I’m trying to get a burger.”

*Damn*, I thought. “Buddy,” I said, “I have one dollar left, and I need it. It’s my last dollar.”

He looked at me like: *Yeah. Your last dollar bill. Sure.* I appeared well-fed and rested from my stay in the apartment, much different from when I was out walking the roads. But I felt quite righteous, because at least I was telling the truth.

I walked up the street and crossed Lincoln Avenue. On my way through Loyola’s courtyard, I got to thinking. I had told myself that if anyone at all asked me for money, I would give it away, regardless of what situation I was in. I had given away all my money before and had never experienced hardship. In fact I had encountered the opposite. And look at me now, all fat and happy with food for a week and a nice pullout bed to sleep on, yet I clung to that dollar bill as if I would have had nothing without it. There was probably only one place in Chicago where I could have bought a soda for a dollar anyway. And that man, even if he was only going to buy a beer with it, needed the dollar more than I.

I turned around and dashed back to McDonald’s, but the man was gone.

*(end of excerpt)*