

Web Blog SUNwalk 2008 IX

3/3 – 3/12/2008

Albuquerque – Clovis, New Mexico

3/3/2008

Albuquerque

The first visit in an American school warms my heart. Adrian Schaefer is the teacher of these 9-year old third grade students. He offers his guidance with love, respect, and enthusiasm. Everybody claps a certain rhythm they had agreed on when there is time to focus on something. And then everybody is fully there. The kids are awake and curious. All of them participate actively at the teaching lesson. I can feel a basic trust and a willingness to take risks in asking questions and giving answers. One can tell that the children are supported and not judged or ridiculed. I am also astonished how well informed they are in the area of climate change and energy issues. Some of them share freely thoughts about their high energy consumption, and also about possible steps how the waste can be reduced. At the end a shy girl with straight brown hair lifts her hand: “Do you know the movie ‘Forrest Gump’?” After the lesson the children walk with me towards the center of Albuquerque for a while. Some of them also want to pull James, the cart. It’s moving to watch how the little bodies give everything to pull the heavy load and to keep the cart in balance at the same time.

John and Richard Schaefer follow me through the town. They are making some films and pictures that they will use for the planned home page SUNwalk2008, a learning tool for US kids and adolescents. Suddenly we find ourselves in the heart of town, on a beautiful square surrounded by adobe mansions, a church, and stores. It reminds me of the squares in the middle of Spanish towns where people walk the “paseo” on warm summer nights. Then I follow Central Avenue again, the former Route 66, towards east, towards the mountains.

A young Afro-American man attracts my attention. He walks on the other sidewalk towards the town center. He is about 20. He has a long and wide coat. His movements flow naturally, gracefully, like the movements of a black panther. His beautiful face is smiling, open to the sun, to the bright afternoon sky. The light is shining on his skin – a young human being in a moment of well-being and joy of life. Soon later I see a restaurant with a salad bar. For a few dollars they offer “all you can eat”.

I enter the promising place and fill up all my inner storage room with the great selection of salads and casseroles. When I leave the restaurant again and hook me up to James, the man I saw before is passing me. We greet each other laughing, and then we walk together, about a thousand steps – he kept walking into the same direction like me, a little bit longer than his original route. He speaks about his love for poetry. I quote my two favorite poems of Mary Oliver, “The Wild Geese” and “The Journey”. He inquires about what I am carrying with me. We speak about our life path, about our inner voice that guides us, that knows what we are meant to become. This short encounter is so rich – I feel the mourning pain of letting go when Jayce stops and goes back on his path. Later he sends me a quote by the rapper Courdek: “I am me, but I am you as well. I am everything you touch, taste, see, feel, think, and smell. We're well above divinity, held with great affinity, beyond even infinity you see I'm simply energy.”

I find a room in a motel, just before the road gets quite steep, an uphill stretch between the Sandia and Manzano mountains. A boy and a girl are playing computer games at the guest computer in the motel lobby. After a while I ask them whether I can also use the computer. I have some homework to do. “What kind of home work,” the 12-year old pretty brown girl with the long black hair asks. “I would like to read the mails of my friends in Switzerland and answer them.” “Is that fun for you?” “Oh, yes?” “OK, go ahead.”

3/4/2008

Albuquerque – Moriarty

Route 66 is winding around freeway 40 like the snail around the stick of Asclepius. It goes up and up, following a natural pass between the Sandia and Manzano mountains, a pass that connected eastern New Mexico with the

Rio Grande Valley already in prehistoric times. During the period of Spanish colonialism the pass was called Canyon de Carnue, today Tijeras Canyon. Down in the valley a glittering brook sparkles in the morning sun, with trees and bushes along the river benches. The hair of the body indicates where warm and juicy life is pulsating – in the body of the landscape the trees and bushes give a hunch where the water, the juice of life is flowing.

When the highest point of the Tijeras pass is reached the road doesn't go down again – it remains on a vast, sandy-yellow high plateau. It will be my playground during the next week, until the Texan border. From far away I can see Moriarty – it's easy to recall this name – “mori” in Latin for dying, and “art”. The art of living well grows into the art of dying well. Also the amiable lady at the motel reception knows a life story about that. At the age of about 68 she has already 4 great-grand children. Her oldest grand-child is 29, her youngest 4. Like her daughters she married at the age of 19.

3/5/2008

Moriarty – Willard

On our walk with the mule Fanny from Elm to Neuchatel in Switzerland in 1995 the mule throws a temper tantrum in Glarus. It storms into a gasoline station where brand-new Toyota cars are lined up. The owner is horrified, of course. I can chain Fanny to a tree in a little park. Within seconds the lawn is plowed. The confusion goes on, during the whole night, also in the horse stable near the lake of Kloental. But then Fanny calms finally down and becomes quiet and cooperative for the rest of the journey. What had happened? In Glarus we left the direction that lead to Fanny's home stable in Thurgau, eastern Switzerland.

I think at Fanny when I take highway 42. This road leads me from Moriarty to the south, away from my already internalized pull towards east. I have to stay on this road, the so called “Salt Mission Trail” during the whole day before it turns into highway 60 that goes east again. During centuries salt has been transported from the south to Albuquerque and Santa Fe. There were also many missionary stations along that road. Somewhere along the road there are also ruins of a dry ice factory – there are natural CO₂ wells that were used for this production from the thirties to the fifties of the last century.

I am waving again to all the drivers. There is one that impresses me especially: A wild man, big unkempt beard, sparkling eyes, some lonesome teeth in the mouth, a smile coming out of an old ragged car.

Again and again I am having wonderful encounters with animals. The sand brown horse with the dark mane, tail, and nostrils looks at me. It makes some steps towards me. It runs around in a circle throwing its mane into the air and comes back to the fence. When I continue my walk, it follows me. Some trees are separating us now. It runs around the trees and comes back to the fence. There is this strong bond between us, a spontaneous, instantaneous flow of energy between two beings, relationship. The animal follows me until the end of its pasture. When I look back after some hundred yards it's still standing there and looking at me. I become aware how much letting go is a part of this nomadic life, a sweet and painful feeling. I consider seriously for a moment: Why not to choose such a horse as a traveling companion? We could share our load and enjoy the walk together. But then I imagine the big cities, all the new challenges to bring such a horse to Boston; and then I continue my walk alone, light-footed.

Or the black cows – from far away I see the black dots on a vast, yellow plain. They are grazing. Their heads are rubbing the ground, almost all of them into the same direction. When I approach them all of them lift their head and look at me, they too, with big, black eyes, black curls between their horns, shining black mouths. Suddenly cheerful movement comes in the herd. They come to the fence, they follow me, they start to run, and they throw their legs into the air. They walk with me for several hundred yards, until a barbed wire fence stops them and pushes them together into a corner of the field. They also remain there for a while and follow the hiker with their eyes.

Two hares show up too – they have dark tails, longer if compared with the white bunny tails of the wild rabbits. One of them is running across the street and soon disappears, zigzagging, in the bushes. The other is flying out from behind a grass hide-away. It's running ahead of me in a half-circle and hides again. It repeats this interval game several times before it draws a big circle around me running to the other side of the road and back where it disappears in the prairie. The stiff long ears that it stretches up into the air remain visible above the bushes for a while, like twin dwarfs fleeing from a giant.

There are also about 40 elks. They float apart and gather again – the herd looks like a white pulsating ball in the dusk thanks to the white rear ends of their bodies.

The hawk caresses the air between the earth and the sky. With its tanned-brown color it fits so perfectly into this vast sandy space.

These encounters with animals remind me so strongly of our responsibility for our animal brothers and sisters – being a species with consciousness and choices. I am convinced: The respect for animals and trees will play an important part whether we will have a future as a species or not. The writer Elias Canetti calls the extinction of every species a partial blinding of ourselves. I see trucks that transport animals on the roads. I enter restaurants that have nothing on the menu without meat. I see the brands where cows have been burnt to be identified by the owner – it gave the name “brand” to specific products. Also the word “livestock” – living merchandise, expression for the process of transforming living beings into things with which we can do everything we want – from the “I – Thou” to “I – It” as Martin Buber has called it.

On TV I see a satellite picture of the sea near the east coast of South America – the lights of the industrial fishery fleets look like the lights of multimillion cities on the mainland. The food chain is being exploited and increasingly destroyed, already at its beginning.

The packed meat in our stores is an expression of our worldwide splitting off of feelings. Who has ever visited a slaughterhouse and witnessed the enormous suffering of the animals? When the horse or the cows look at me, I cannot suppress this thought.

Enough of preaching; I stop now before my friends start to feel miserable; but I am grateful that in the religion I belong to there is a man, Francis from Assisi, who was aware of our responsibility for the animals and who related to them. What a privilege to be born on St. Francis Day, the “Day of the Animals”.

In the early afternoon I arrive in Estancia. That means “resting place”. It is a settlement since 1776. There is a beautiful spring there that feeds a pond in a nice park with old cotton wood trees. Estancia has also the reputation to be the place where in 1922 a theft has still been killed by hanging.

In the Public Library, a new building next to the town park, I am sitting next to Brad Earlewine. Brad is a retired school teacher and a chess champion. He has many stories to tell. He also calls Vanessa, a young librarian of Spanish descent. He encourages her to use her connections with people of the next town, Willard. A snow storm is coming, and the hiker should have a place to stay for the night. Vanessa makes several phone calls. At the end she comes and informs me that there may be a couch in the fire department of Willard where I could sleep. I should be in the “Cantina”, the only restaurant of this small town, by 6 o’clock PM. The head of the fire department, Mrs. Chavez, will be there and show me the place. Vanessa leaves the library in order to find a camera. She wants to make a picture for the local newspaper. I am already on the road again when Vanessa passes me and stops, with the camera.

At six o’clock I enter „La Cantina“ – a cold wind has just come up before, and the first snow flurries are filling the dusky air in Willard, the small town where about 300 people live. Pat, the brunette owner in her sixties, brings me cheese tortillas and a hot chocolate that warms up my stiff body quickly. “Can I pay with my VISA card?” I ask after dinner. “No, a man who walks that far has nothing to pay here.” And then a man shows up: “I am Feliz. You sleep in our house. Come with me.” He brings me to his house, some minutes away, where I meet Mary, his wife, a Christmas child, born on Christmas day, their son Thomas, and their grand-son Weston, a smart, sensitive 11-year old boy. Feliz spent two years in Germany as a soldier. He works at the “Cantina” and is a very talented all-round craftsman. Mary teaches religion. They have open hearts, an open house. Vanessa has left a message on their answering-machine that they heard later; and soon I am in a warm bed with lots of pillows and blankets hearing the snowstorm roaring outside.

3/6/2008

Willard – Encino

After a rich breakfast that Mary makes for all of us Feliz gives me an extra pair of gloves and some heat packages. I have told him the night before that I have only one problem with the weather: to warm up my hands. I am going east again, on Route 60. The next 170 miles lead through almost

uninhabited, monotonous prairie – rolling hills, plains, once in a while a small ghost village with only a few houses where people live in, next to many ruins. But always, there is a nice little post office that still holds up the American flag. Sometimes I see a black cow, a horse, also a lama. There is only little traffic. After a while I recognize some drivers who commute on route 60. The long freight trains crawl through this lonely landscape, back and forth. If there is a road crossing the rails the locomotive engineers hunk, loudly, for a long time.

In the morning there are about 5 inches of snow. But there is also a dry wind that licks the snow away from the steaming road. On the left hand side there are still thick snow clouds. On the right hand side there is open, blue sky again. I walk during this so called “High Desert” during the whole day. The only companions are little grey-brown birds. They flock together on the road, and when I come closer, they are flying away and are landing again, a little bit further down the road.

In one of the ghost villages there is still a small convenience store. I ask the lady there whether I could find a place to stay in this village. The night will be quite cold, and the ground is wet and muddy because of the snow, not an ideal situation for camping. She thinks for a while. “Go to Mike!” she says. “He lives at the other end of the village. There are some walls with a lot of stuff around, broken cars, tools, a camper, that kind of stuff. He just was here. Now he is sawing wood behind the house, you will hear it. He opens sometimes his camper for travelers. He is a nice guy.”

I find everything the lady described, the walls, and all the stuff. It seems that Mike has finished his sawing job already. If there was not smoke coming out of a small tin chimney I wouldn't have believed that somebody lives at this place. I knock at the door. No answer. I go around the house, knock at another door. No answer, again. When I go back to the road, I hear something moving in the house. Mike opens the door.

A wild man, big unkempt beard, sparkling eyes, some lonesome teeth in the mouth, a smile. I knew I saw him before. He recognizes me too: “I saw you yesterday morning near Moriarty. We waved to each other.” He shows me the camper. While I am preparing a bed there Mike looks for a heater. “It's one minus one leg. I get a brick in order to stabilize it.” And: “Sorry, there is no TV, no water in the trailer.” “No problem for me.” “Do you wanna smoke

some grass?” he offers me some other comfort. But I am already half in the world of dreams without anything.

3/7/2008

Encino – Vaughn

It's very cold this morning. Thanks to the heat packages that Feliz gave me I can warm up my hands. I am glad that I arrive early in Vaughn. The lady in the City Hall allows me to use her computer. Several people tried to reach me, without success. I also couldn't be reached for an interview by Swiss Info.

For several days there is no service for my cellular phone. Also computers are quite rare in the “High Desert”. Fortunately I can write some explaining mails in the City Hall. The lady recommends a good motel, and I realize that Cathy, the owner, is the sister of the City Hall employee. The village communication has also well worked already. Cathy knows that I would like to write during my stay and offers me her laptop spontaneously. The restaurant at the end of the village is open during 24 hours a day. I enjoy to have a warm meal again and to catch up with the calorie intake for the next few days.

3/8/2008

Vaughn – Yeso

Today I am lucky – good weather, great back wind. I am making very good mileage, 36 miles, 34 on a completely straight road. When the road makes a left turn after 34 miles it's as if I am falling out of a trance, the trance of walking straight ahead. In the beginning of the day a tumble-weed keeps me company for quite a while until it gets stuck in a fence.

For long distances I am using sometimes an interval mode of walking and running – 100 running steps, 50 walking steps, alternating. I have heard that some Native-American tribes have also used this method. With the back wind and long downhill stretches it's a perfect day for this traveling mode.

Tom is less lucky today with the wind. Already from far away I see a biker who works hard to go against the wind on his fully packed vehicle. What a joy to meet Tom Hornyak, a soul of kindred spirits, in the middle of such a deserted area. He has left Florida on 1/28/2008. He leaves behind the school benches, the books, and he is pedaling towards west, also through the whole country. The encounter and the sharing with Tom recharge my “batteries” for the rest of the day. He tells me about his camping sites, once beneath the railway tracks in a tunnel, once behind a supermarket. He is also surprised how cold it is here. He will head to warmer areas as soon as possible (www.crazyguyonabike.com/doc/tomontour).

There is a dead skunk on the shoulder of the road. The wind carries its smell for miles and miles, and I am reminded of the skunk which sprayed me in the backyard in Brookline in 1980 with very impressive results. It took months until the smell has left me and my belongings.

In the evening I put my tent in an old abandoned cattle shelter, outside of the ghost village Yeso. The setting sun sends her orange light through a gap between two wood boards and illuminates my sleeping dome in a wonderful way. I return to the village and ask one of the last people there, an old man with a white mustache whether it's OK if I camp there. I just wanted to meet somebody who still lives in this lonely place. „Don't worry. Nobody will bother you there; except the snakes“. “They are sleeping now.“ „Hopefully.“ I would have enjoyed meeting some snakes. We are more dangerous to them than they are for us.

3/9/2008

Yeso – Fort Sumner

A sign at the entrance of Fort Sumner says: „Williams Deak Parson (1901 – 1953), ‘The Atomic General’“. He was the military person that was responsible for the preparation and the use of the first atomic bombs. It reminds me of the fact that here in New Mexico the first atomic bomb was detonated, the Trinity test. Another man is also omnipresent here – Billy the Kid. He must have been very handsome, a tough guy who did a lot of doubtful things. Fort Sumner is proud that he is buried here. Instead of these two power men that have disappeared for quite a while I meet two cheerful power women in the Bandana Café. I eat my salad and want to pay. “No

way”, says one of the two owners. She puts my bill on a needle where all the paid bills are pierced, one on top off the other. “It’s a joy for us to have you as a guest.” Her colleague asks me why I make this walk. “Take some hikers with you. Masses should walk for this cause.” I wish her a good life before I start again. “That I have,” she laughs, “if something doesn’t fit anymore, I change it immediately.”

3/10/2008

Fort Sumner – Melrose

It gets warmer. There are fine green grasses sprouting out of the cracks at the shoulder of the road. The bird songs get louder and more sophisticated. More and more bees, flies, butterflies – and motor bikers – are swarming. The sky appears light blue, turquoise above the horizon. Light, happy clouds are floating weightlessly over the prairies. Where the sun rays meet a cloud, a skewed shadow ribbon appears between the cloud and the horizon – zebra sky.

In Melrose I ask the young man in the grocery store where I can camp. A lady who is shopping also listens to us and suggests that I camp in the little town park next to the store. The young man says that I can also go to his parents’ house and knock at the door if I feel safer in their back yard. Another young customer comments: “That seems to be a plan”, when he learns about my walk. There is a nice gazebo in the park where I start to build my tent. A car stops. Casey Holloway greets me. ”Come with me you can stay in our youth center. It’s less windy there. My mother called me and told me about you” – the woman in the store. I walk behind his car to the center and sleep on a big sofa in the huge hall.

3/11/2008

Melrose – Clovis, New Mexico

In the Hampton Inn in Clovis two things are waiting for me: A new pair of sandals and a box with Spruengli chocolate from Switzerland. It was a long stretch to enter Clovis and to find the hotel at the east end of town. I imagine

the candies, like the donkey that follows the carrots that are attached in front of his nose. That helps. I enjoy a day of resting and writing before I leave New Mexico for Texas tomorrow. I see the first open cherry blossoms.

My friend Andi Hoffmann will participate at a cardiology meeting. Afterwards we will meet in Oklahoma City, on 3/31/2008. I am very much looking forward to walk together.