

Web Blog SUNwalk 2008 engl. XIV

4/1/ - 4/10/2008

Oklahoma City, OK - Fort Smith, AR

4/1/2008

Oklahoma City - Harrah, OK

“STEPS

Light and lively

Weary and dull

Painful and hesitant

Energetic and wide

Every single step

Brings me forward

In its own way

That is the lyrical harvest of the three hiking days with you! In spite of my ‘suffering’ I enjoyed to have this adventure – all these unique human encounters, the connection with the ground, the slowness, the experience of big distances. And finally I was impressed by the experience that the tortured feet can be used again after 12 hours.

I wish you a good continuation of your journey, many opportunities to share your thoughts about our energy future with people. I can follow now your path from a completely different perspective. You will hear from me from time to time. Many good steps and warm greetings,” Andy Hoffmann writes to me after our common time. The three days of hiking together belong to the highlights of my trip. After weeks of being a solitary walker I enjoy so much to share again with a friend, to walk together, to make decisions

together.

Andy arrives at noon on 4/1. I expect him already the night before; but his flight from Chicago has been cancelled; but after a time of uncertainty he gets a morning flight to Oklahoma City. He changes clothes. He puts the suitcase into the locker room of the hotel – and off we go. Soon we are walking behind a big crowd of people, including the Mayor of Oklahoma City. It's the start of a charity walk for a community project – it's a nice feeling not to be a single walker, for a change.

There is a lot of traffic on highway 62 towards east – a rough start for Andy. Towards the end of the afternoon we arrive in Choctaw and make a break in the Harley-Davidson Café. The landlady and an impressive guest – he sits on a chair in upright position and parks his belly in front of him in a relaxed way – they are very interested in our walk. They help us to find a place to stay in Choctaw. They make some phone calls: There is a cabin available, on a KOA campground (Kampgrounds of America). The Café owner draws a street map so we can find the place. They also try to motivate a TV station to meet with us; but after I while we are leaving.

The KOA campground is located at a street that leads to the south, perpendicularly to highway 62. After about half an hour we realize: It will be a distance of 44 blocks to get there, almost 5 miles – tomorrow five miles back – too far. Does KOA stand for KO at arrival? We turn back towards highway 62. Next to the road there is the ruin of a house. We expect a rainstorm for the night; so we go into the house and evaluate whether we can camp inside. But it doesn't look very homey; therefore we go on. We are relieved being on the road towards east again. After a long bridge we see a florist shop. A pick up truck is parked in front of it. A man walks around the car. He opens the door to the assistant driver's seat and takes something out. We hope he won't drive away before we had a chance to ask him about a dry camping spot. "Martin?" he asks when we are there. He has waited for us. He introduces him as James Young, the brother-in-law of Marilyn Rantlin. I camped in Rantlin's backyard in Minco, some days ago. He offers us two bags, one with peanuts, one with pecan kernels – as a welcoming gift. "Oh yeah, you can camp at our place. We have a big canopy where you can stay dry for the night. But it's another 6 miles to get to Harrah, where we live." "We can still walk six miles." He explains to us how we can find his house - second traffic light, to the right, Dobbs Road." He says he will turn on all the

lights. We let him drive ahead and follow walking, with James, the cart, and a heavy backpack full of food for dinner. Dusk, then it gets dark. But the 1 ½ hours pass quickly – we have so much to tell each other.

We find everything as described. There are many little lamps around the house. The white pick up truck has been parked near the road and is very well visible. When we approach the house, James, his wife Rachel, and Lois the third sister, come out and greet us. They welcome us into their warm living room. James has waited in front of the flower shop for two hours. Marilyn has called them after my visit in Minco and has told them about my walk. Today at noon, Rachel and Lois see us on the road. They have some doubts whether it's me because there were two of us. But then they see us again in Choctaw, and they are quite sure that the guy with the cart is me. James takes of and waits for us.

We eat our dinner in the warm living-room. We share stories of our lives. We look at the photos on the wall that show several generations of the two families of Rachel and James. Andy receives also one of Ray's beautiful wooden pens as a gift. Later James shows us their trailer that is parked in the garden where we can stay for the night.

4/2/2008

Harrah -Meeker, OK

Also today some angels cooperate to provide a dry shelter for us. Before Meeker it starts to rain. We escape from the rain into a little coffee shop, the "Bad Dawg" and eat something there. I ask two elder gentlemen at the next table whether they can suggest a dry camping place to us – there is no motel or hotel in Meeker. Kent with his white cowboy hat thinks about my question. He discusses it with his friend: "Three miles from here there is a house with stables. You can certainly camp in one of the cattle shelters there." We are not too excited about this perspective – thunderstorms with strong winds are announced. Just in the moment when we want to pay and leave Kent comes to the table, beaming. He speaks with the minister of the Methodist church, Mike Melton, at his cellular phone: "You can stay in a room of the Methodist church – it's about half a mile from here. When can

you be there?" and to Mike: "They will arrive in 10, 15 minutes."

"You made my day!" Mike welcomes us with enthusiasm. He assigns us a big room. We can take a shower in his apartment. We also can check our e-mails there. We get to know Cindy, his wife. They met as young people. Then they didn't see each other for many years before they met again. They married three years ago. Now they are preparing the final exam together in order to become masters of Divinity. Mike tells us that the Methodist church opposed the war in Iraq from the beginning – "that was not always easy in a conservative region like here."

Later a group of teenagers arrive, members of a youth church group. They start a brainstorming and collect questions they could ask us. Then they invite us for a Q & A session. At the end a serious, pale, shy, big young man approaches me and introduces himself. He asks what title I will choose for the book I intend to write about my journey. He intends to be on the look-out for it. I think of me - very unsporting at that age, shy, serious. It is as if I encounter myself after all these years.

4/3/2008

Meeker - Prague, OK

I admire Andy and his heroism. He suffers from huge painful blisters; but he keeps going, until Prague. This town has been founded by Czech emigrants in 1902. I find a "bed & bath" room – a long flight of stairs leads to the second floor in an old building, above a "boutique" – this accommodation is not very well-known in town. Andy travels back to Boston from here – Malinda from the "boutique" gives him a ride to the next bus station because there is now public transportation available in Prague. I am on my own again.

4/4/2008

Prague - Okemah, OK

Boley is a big village of African Americans. B. Boley, a white road master, convinces the Fort Smith & Western Railroad Company in 1903 that black people can govern themselves alone. 4'200 African Americans build up this "all-black-town" within the Creek Nation.

It is wonderful how spring evolves – it's almost visible how the leaves come out, every day a little bit more; how the green grass grows where the grass was still yellow a week ago. In the backyards there are trees with ball shaped crowns that stand already in full, pea-green foliage. Today it's warm, like in summer. There is no cloud at the evening sky. There is an abundance of beautiful birds: A red cardinal – no wonder just before the U.S. visit of the Pope, then a bird of exquisite beauty with orange-golden belly, grey-blue head, white collar, and long tail. Again and again I see herons flying away from idyllic brooks. Starlets form flushes. They fly in trembling squealing garlands above the road – half of it is absorbed by a tree north, half of it by one south of the road. There are over 300 swallow nests built along the bottom edge of a freeway bridge – clouds of swallows flying around them. Hawks circle in the air - hovering, dancing in the wind. Two elegant birds with grey, brown, and white feathers with long tails are fighting a battle competing for the same territory. Again and again they attack each other; they spin around each other. They let go of each other before they clash again. After a while one of them gives up and hides in a hedge nearby. Wild geese are staggering around ponds before they continue their long journey. Frogs are croaking, an evening concert along the way. It sounds as if a small timbre board is stroked on a solid corded surface, slowly first, then with more drive – the pitch between stork clatter and a fax noise.

In the Days Inn Hotel in Okemah Teresa welcomes me with a friendly smile: "You look like somebody coming from the Alps!" She doesn't know anything about me so far. She would love to see the Alps; but she doesn't have the opportunity to travel. Her daughter catches up there. She loves traveling around.

4/5/2008

Okemah - Henryetta, OK

When I lived in Boston my research grant was sent to the Lincoln Savings Bank. The bank had a Smiley as a symbol. Its motto was: "Happiness is a Small Bank!". I am reminded of that when I find the library on the hilltop, next to the High School in Okemah. "Happiness is a Small Library!" The librarian offers me to use her private computer when the public one doesn't open my e-mail server. You can use it for everything you need – but not for pornography," she jokes.

In the evening I watch TV in the "Green Inn Motel" in Henryetta. For the first time I see a commercial of the Alliance for Climate Protection – an organization with close ties to Al Gore: "We didn't wait for others when we invaded the Normandy in 1944; when we stood up for Civil Rights; when we landed on the moon. We will also not wait for others protecting our climate" Viewers are directed to the home page "www.wecansolveit.org" where examples of own steps for energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy are listed. This 300 million \$-campaign has been started recently.

4/6/ - 4/10/2008

Henryetta – Checotah – Gore – Sallisaw, OK – Fort Smith, Arkansas

I pass the hamlet "Hoffman" – too bad that Andy has already left. It would have been a nice picture with him and the signpost.

There are huge lakes in the Eufula region. Also more and more "stars" are added to the galaxy of heart warming encounters during my journey:

With Spirit, a small, cheerful guy with long, fine, red curly hair, few teeth left, backpack, colorful woolen hat. He is hitchhiking to the next country

music festival. He cannot understand as a vegan that I drink milk. All the same he shouts with his loud, harsh voice: “We love you. You are loved, you know that.”

I think also of the encounter with Jim and Sherry Wakeman in the Subway restaurant in Warner. Sometimes I meet people who understand the essence of the SUNwalk immediately. There is no need to explain them my motivation, concerns, and visions. Jim und Sherry belong to them. For me these encounters are like meetings with siblings, with kindred spirits.

The same holds true with Merle und Sandy Speer from Council Hill. Next to a small white house in a rural area a truck with the label “Noll” is parked. An elder man does some gardening. “Is ‘Noll’ your last name?” I ask. I think at Hans Noll, a Swiss ornithologist, a good friend of my parents whom I loved dearly, like a grand-father. He had a long beard and much understanding for children. “No, I am Merle Speer.” Then we have a 10 minute conversation, about our lives, like old friends. Merle calls Sandy, his wife. Their love for nature, their spirituality, and their openness evoke strong feelings of sympathy and give me a lot of energy for the rest of the day.

One episode provokes some afterthoughts. As often before I “water” a tree after a lunch break and continue my hike. After 15 minutes a big black car stops in front of me. A tall man with sunglasses talks into a microphone and leaves the car. “Do you have an ID?” I show him my passport. “Do you have another ID?” “I have a drivers license – 1967 – and an English translation of it – 1972.” “A Swedish license.” “No, a Swiss license.” “Did you urinate against a tree before?” he asks. “Yes.” “This is indecent behavior and forbidden.” The sheriff walks to his car with my passport. He calls somebody, probably the Sheriff’s Department, and dictates my personal data. “Don’t do that anymore in the future!” he says coming back, in a not unfriendly way. “Use restrooms in stores and restaurants!” And he drives away.

My first response: Protest. Somebody has denounced me. What should I do when there is no restaurant and store like today? And anyway: Thousands of people drive around. They pollute the air. They kill hundreds of animals – deer, armadillos, racoons, skunks, opossums, rabbits, owls and other birds. I

am seeing so many dead animals along the road. 1,2 million people are killed every year worldwide in car accidents. Car accidents cause costs of 580 billion US \$. And all that is decent behavior. But if I must pee, in a rural area where there are no rest rooms, no people to ask about whether I can use their facilities, is that indecent behavior? My second reaction: The tree was located quite close to a house. I could have found a more hidden place. There was a fence – I was outside of it; but probably I was on private property. I imagine that a stranger pees on my property, near my little house. I would also be “pissed off”. I am realizing: Hiking outdoors for more than three months brought me closer to nature; and at the same time I became too careless in these civilized matters. I feel gratitude to the Sheriff that he confronted me, in a correct, almost friendly way. In the evening I am writing him a letter and ask him for a favor: To contact the person who has told him this story, and to tell him or her that I regret it and that I ask him for forgiveness.

In the small village of “Gore” I read on a poster: “Re-elect Carter”. Are these new developments in the presidential race? But then I see: It’s not Jimmy, but Steve; and he doesn’t run for president, but for the commissioner of the district #2...

For 4/9 powerful thunderstorms are forecasted – even tornados and hale. Should I stay in Sallisaw and wait? In the morning it’s still dry. I risk to reach Fort Smith that day. After a while I walk in a cloud of thick, wet fog. Also strong NE winds are blowing. I open the umbrella, but not for a long time. It’s like a sail that holds me back. I walk without protection, relaxed and open, singing with the wet winds. I get wet; but when I cross the Arkansas River and enter the sixth state of my journey and Fort Smith, I am dry again.

On 8:30 PM the storm arrives. I am swimming in the pool of the hotel when masses of hale hit the glass roof – an ear-piercing splutter. It doesn’t last long before I am out of the water. All hotel guests meet in the central hall, away from the outside windows. Within seconds a thick layer of hale ice covers the surroundings of the hotel. Some roof lights and windows are damaged. I never experienced such strong nature forces on land.

I am now about half-way to Boston. I am feeling the strong pull towards east. Tomorrow the journey goes on – I am looking forward to the next stretch – Arkansas is called the “Natural State”.